

*The Ocean of Inquiry*

A Neglected Classic of Late Advaita Vedānta

A dissertation presented

by

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to

The Committee on the Study of Religion

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the subject of

The Study of Religion

Harvard University

Cambridge, Massachusetts

April 2013

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Abstract

*The Ocean of Inquiry* is a vernacular compendium of Advaita Vedānta, one of the most influential traditions of South Asian religion and philosophy, especially in modern times. Its author, Niścaldās (ca. 1791 – 1863), was a classically trained pandit and a *sādhū* of the Dādū Panth. His work was widely read in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, both in its Hindi original and in regional translations: Vivekananda once referred to it as the most influential book in India. Surprisingly, however, *The Ocean of Inquiry* remains virtually unknown to Western scholars; even specialists in Hinduism have rarely heard of it. This dissertation aims to draw attention both to Niścaldās’s work and to the broader genre of vernacular Vedānta; it also calls into question the notion that late Advaita Vedānta represents a period of intellectual decline.

Part I provides a historical and textual overview of *The Ocean of Inquiry*, arguing that Niścaldās’s work should be situated within what might be termed “Greater Advaita Vedānta,” or Advaita Vedānta as it was disseminated outside the received canon of Sanskrit philosophical works. This part of the dissertation also offers the first comprehensive biography of Niścaldās in English, and it analyzes the significance of his choice to write in the vernacular.

Part II investigates the relationship of philosophy and religious practice in Niścaldās’s work. Taking as its starting point the question “What does it mean for knowledge to liberate?” this part of the dissertation argues that for Niścaldās, the key distinction is not between theoretical knowledge and liberating knowledge but between doubtful and doubt-free

awareness. For those who are properly qualified, the central practice on the path to liberation is the practice of inquiry (*vicāra*), interpreted as a dialectical process of raising and removing doubts. This interpretation is supported with three “case studies” of characters in *The Ocean of Inquiry* who reach liberation. The conclusion is that for Nīścaldās, philosophical inquiry is not a purely theoretical undertaking; under the right conditions, it can become a concrete religious practice.

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नोत्पद्यते विना ज्ञानं विचारेणान्यसाधनैः

Knowledge does not arise through any other means apart from inquiry.

*-Aparokṣānubhūti, verse 11*

## Preface

The wonderful thing about the study of South Asia, at least for a graduate student in search of a dissertation topic, is how open the field is: one need not look far to find rewarding texts and topics virtually untouched by other scholars. Advaita Vedānta is one of the most studied traditions of Indian philosophy and religion—some would perhaps call it over-studied—but even here, so much work remains to be done. An excellent example is the rich trove of Vedāntic texts written not in Sanskrit but in vernaculars across India, which no doubt played an important role in popularizing the tradition, but which remain unstudied and in many cases even unknown. This dissertation aims to draw attention to the genre of vernacular Vedānta by focusing on a Hindi-language work that was extremely popular in the nineteenth century: Nīścaldās's *Ocean of Inquiry* (*Vicār-sāgar*).

I came across Nīścaldās's work by chance. I had studied Advaita Vedānta for several years without knowing anything about vernacular Vedānta; like many students of South Asian religions, I was under the impression that Vedānta was essentially a Sanskrit tradition. Then, in 2004-2005 I went to Jaipur to study Hindi through the American Institute of Indian Studies, and I chose to work on *The Ocean of Inquiry* for my final project. I knew of it only through the introduction to Ramana Maharshi's *Jewel Garland of Inquiry*, which explained that Ramana's work was based on “a rare book known as *Vichara Sagaram* written in Hindi by Sadhu Nishchaldas.” Only later did I learn that this “rare book” was once referred to by Vivekananda as the most influential book in India.

*The Ocean of Inquiry* turned out to hold a double interest for me. There was of course its historical significance and the wider world of vernacular Vedānta towards which it pointed. But there was also the world within the text. In particular, *The Ocean of Inquiry* seemed to hint

at a solution to a problem I had been puzzling over for a long time. To put the matter bluntly: why were late Advaita Vedāntins so obsessed with polemics and scholastic hair-splitting? Didn't they belong to a tradition that emphasized the direct realization of a reality beyond all words and thought? Reading Niścaldās helped me see the tradition in a new light: not filtered through my own presuppositions about what counts as “concrete” or “practical,” but through a worldview in which philosophical inquiry itself can become a concrete spiritual practice.

I am grateful to the American Institute of Indian Studies for funding during my year in Jaipur, as well as for a summer research grant that allowed me to begin research on the life of Niścaldās. I owe thanks to all my teachers at the Hindi Language Program, but especially to Vidhu Chaturvedi for reading carefully and patiently through the first chapter of the text with me. I also wish to thank Śrī Gopāldās-jī Mahārāj of the Dādūdvarā in Nareṇa (Rajasthan) for his hospitality, as well as Dvārikādās Śāstrī-jī of Banaras for meeting with me and kindly providing me with a copy of his edition of Niścaldās's text.

In the summer of 2011 I received a grant from the South Asia Institute at Harvard to attend the Braj Bhasha and Early Hindi Retreat in Miercurea-Ciuc, Romania. I am grateful to all the participants for listening with enthusiasm as I discussed my project, and especially to Professors Imre Bangha, Monika Horstmann, and Allison Busch for their one-on-one help and advice. Thanks also to Professor Jack Hawley for offering several helpful leads early in my research, and for continuing to show enthusiastic interest in the project. I am also indebted to Shankar Nair for his friendship, support, and countless enriching conversations over the years.

As a graduate student, so much depends on the faculty one works under. I have had the rare good fortune to have not just one but three outstanding guides during my time at Harvard: Professors Parimal Patil, Francis Clooney, and Anne Monius. I am immensely grateful



to each of them, not only for their help with this project, but for all their support and encouragement over the years. A very special thanks to Professor Patil; I could not have asked for a better advisor.

The British philosopher Michael Dummett once reflected in a preface on the “conventional fatuity” of claiming responsibility for all errors in a work. “Obviously,” he writes, “only I can be *held* responsible for these: but, if I could recognize the errors, I should have removed them, and, since I cannot, I am not in the position to know whether any of them can be traced back to the opinions of those who have influenced me.” Fatuously or not, I do claim responsibility for all errors in this work. May the reader approach them with Nīścaldās’s words in mind: *dayā dharma siratāja*, “Compassion is the crown of virtue.”

To my wife, Elizabeth, I owe a greater debt of gratitude than I could ever hope to repay in a preface: for her boundless support, for her patience during countless evenings spent with cups of coffee rather than cups of Earl Grey, for her friendship, and for her love. To her this work is earnestly dedicated.

## Abbreviations

VS	<i>Vicār-sāgar</i>
VP	<i>Vṛtti-prabhākar</i>
YP	<i>Yukti-prakāś</i>
SK	<i>Sāṃkhya-kārikā</i>

All other titles are spelled out. Note that my citations of the VS follow Niścaldās 2003 (the Khemraj Shrikrishnadass edition). The numbering of the verses in chapter 6 of this edition starts anew after the commentary on verse 12. In my citations, I therefore specify either 6A (the first twelve verses) or 6B (the remaining verses). For example, “VS 6B.8 comm., p. 210” would refer to the commentary on the eighth verse from the second part of chapter 6.

For Hindi transliteration, I have for the most part preserved the final, inherent *-a* when quoting metrical passages or individual words (except for proper names); when quoting prose passages, I have omitted the final *-a*, following standard practice.

Translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

**PART I**  
**Historical and Textual Overview**

## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

*The Ocean of Inquiry – Significance of the text – Reasons for its neglect – Literature review – Scope and method of the present dissertation – Chapter-by-chapter outline*

#### *The Ocean of Inquiry*

*The Ocean of Inquiry* is a vernacular compendium of Advaita Vedānta, one of the most influential traditions of South Asian religion and philosophy, especially in modern times. Its author, the North Indian monk Niścaldās (ca. 1791 – 1863), was revered in his day as both a scholar and a saint. His work contributed to the spread of Vedānta in the nineteenth century, for although his teachings were rooted in classical Sanskrit tradition, he chose to write in Hindi,<sup>1</sup> making his work accessible to a wide audience across North India. The work spread further still with the translation of the *Vicār-sāgar* (as the text is known in Hindi) into other regional languages throughout India; eventually it was even translated into Sanskrit. By the end of the nineteenth century, Swami Vivekananda, himself a key figure in the shaping of modern Hinduism, was able to refer to “the great Nishchaldās, the celebrated author of *Vichār-Sāgar*—which book has more influence in India than any that has been written in any language within the last three centuries.”<sup>2</sup>

Niścaldās’s work represents several remarkable confluences: of Sanskrit scholasticism and vernacular traditions; of technical philosophy and concern for everyday religious practice; of a classical tradition in its twilight and a “world religion” newly emergent. It also remains

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<sup>1</sup> See Shapiro 2007 on the use of “Hindi” to refer to a range of dialects spoken across North India, including Braj Bhāṣā and Avadhī. The difference between Niścaldās’s Hindi—which he refers to simply as *bhāṣā*, “the vernacular”—and Modern Standard Hindi are discussed briefly below and at greater length in chapter 3.

<sup>2</sup> “Reply to the Madras Address,” *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, vol. 4, p. 281. The speech is undated but seems to have been written about a year after Vivekananda’s participation in the 1893 World’s Parliament of Religions in Chicago; “I am now busy writing a reply to the Madras address,” he wrote in a letter dated 25 September 1894 (*Complete Works*, vol. 6, p. 237).

one of the best introductions to Advaita Vedānta in any language: *The Ocean of Inquiry* offers a comprehensive but accessible survey of almost every aspect of the tradition, both practical and theoretical, including metaphysics, epistemology, theology, cosmology, philosophy of language, and meditational practice. Nīścaldās himself viewed the work as a handbook to liberation, which when studied under a qualified teacher was sufficient to lead aspirants of all levels to realize the non-duality of self and Brahman.

Surprisingly, Nīścaldās's work remains virtually unknown to Western scholars; even specialists in Hinduism have rarely heard of it. How is it possible for a text so influential in its day to have been so thoroughly neglected? In the following chapter, I will attempt to answer this question, which I believe holds wider implications for the study of religion in South Asia, if not for other areas of religious studies as well. In this chapter I will also review existing literature on Nīścaldās, introduce the scope and method of the present dissertation, and provide a chapter-by-chapter outline of the argument I plan to make. But first, it is worth saying more about the significance of *The Ocean of Inquiry* and why it merits scholarly attention.

### *Significance of the text*

Already during his lifetime Nīścaldās's reputation had begun to spread across North India. "Your fame in the Vedānta śāstras has reached my ears," wrote the Mahārāj of Bundi, Rām Singh (r. 1821- 1889), in an 1856/7 letter to Nīścaldās. When Nīścaldās died seven years later, his funeral in Delhi drew huge crowds. "Thousands of sādhus, brahmins, and merchants attended," one of his disciples reported in a letter written not long after.<sup>3</sup> In the decades after Nīścaldās's death, *The Ocean of Inquiry* was translated an astounding number of times, its

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<sup>3</sup> Citations and further details on Nīścaldās's life, including a full translation of the two letters quoted above, will be provided in the next chapter.

circulation aided by the rise of the Indian printing industry in precisely this period.<sup>4</sup> *The Ocean of Inquiry* went through multiple editions in Hindi and was eventually translated (often more than once) into Gujarati, Marathi, Bengali, Urdu, Kannada, Tamil, Telugu, English, and Sanskrit.<sup>5</sup> Two other Hindi works of Niścaldās—the *Vṛtti-prabhākar* (an ambitious, highly technical work of epistemology) and the *Yukti-prakāś* (a more accessible, introductory work of Vedānta)—were also published and translated multiple times, though their influence was never as great as that of *The Ocean of Inquiry*. All three works came to be viewed as authoritative expositions of Advaita Vedānta, which is all the more striking in that Niścaldās belonged to the Dādū Panth, a devotional (*bhakti*) order not usually associated with the tradition.

“A work that is already well-known,” wrote the translator to the English edition of *The Ocean of Inquiry* in 1885, “needs no word of commendation. It has made its way in the outlying districts of the Punjab, and every *Sadhu* who knows to read and write receives instruction from his Guru, on this very work.”<sup>6</sup> Early readership for *The Ocean of Inquiry* extended not only across India, but at least in one notable case, across the world: American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839 – 1914) quotes approvingly from the English translation in an essay written in

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<sup>4</sup> On the rise of commercial publishing in India in the second half of the nineteenth century, see Stark 2007.

<sup>5</sup> The online catalogue of the Center for Research Libraries lists two Gujarati translations (SAMP Early 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Indian Books Project, items 11162 and 11374). Blumhardt (1913, p. 211) lists the Marathi version. A Bengali translation is mentioned by several authors (e.g., Shrivastava 2000, p. 583), but I have been unable to track it down. The online catalogue of the Oriental and India Office Collections of the British Library lists an Urdu translation (“in Persian characters ... With a Hindustani translation by Srirama of the Hindi commentary,” British Library shelfmark 14154.e.29); it also lists a version “in Persian characters, with a Hindustani commentary by Lala Baburama” (British Library shelfmark 14154.ee.24). The same catalogue also lists a Kannada translation (shelfmark 14155.d.5), two Tamil translations (shelfmarks 14170.e.53 and 14169.f.23), and two Telugu translations (shelfmarks 14174.b.61 and 14174.c.1). (The catalogue also lists a version in Gurumukhi characters [shelfmark 14154.e.36], but it is unclear whether this is a translation or simply a transliterated version.) For the English translation, see Sreeram 1994 [1885]. For the Sanskrit translation, see Vāsudeva Brahmendra Sarasvatī 1986 [1964]; Nārāyaṇās (vol. 2, p. 853) mentions having seen two other Sanskrit translations as well.

<sup>6</sup> Sreeram 1994, p. I.

1893.<sup>7</sup> In India, Niścaldās's work continued to be read and admired into the twentieth century. The well-known Tamil saint Ramana Maharshi (1879 – 1950) often recommended Niścaldās's work to his disciples, and he himself composed a short text based on the Tamil translation. *The Ocean of Inquiry* was also held in esteem by Candraśekharendra Sarasvatī (1894 – 1994), the revered Śaṅkarācārya of Kanchi, who gave his blessing to the Sanskrit translation published in 1964. Although not as widely known in India today, Niścaldās's text remains in print, and it continues to be used in a variety of settings, from Dādū-panthī sermons in Rajasthan to a Vedāntic lecture series in Chennai.<sup>8</sup>

*The Ocean of Inquiry* is worth studying not only as a work that was widely read in its day, with a reception history that can be more or less clearly traced through its various editions, translations, commentaries, adaptations, and imitations; it is also significant as a window to a larger religious history. Advaita Vedānta, as I remarked at the outset, is one of the most influential traditions of South Asian philosophy and religion, yet the processes by which it rose to this position of prominence have yet to be thoroughly explored. Certainly these processes go back many centuries before Niścaldās. As Minkowski has noted in a recent, pioneering attempt to sketch a “social history” of Advaita Vedānta, Śaṅkara's Vedānta was already the “establishment position” among the pandits of Banaras in the early modern period<sup>9</sup>; and as we shall see in the next chapter, it was there that Niścaldās himself learned Vedānta. But how did Advaita Vedānta become the establishment position in the first place?

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<sup>7</sup> Peirce 1998, p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> On the Dādū-panthī sermons, see Thiel-Horstmann 1992, p. 46, n. 11; on the lecture series, see Bhuvaneshwari 2010, p. 28.

<sup>9</sup> Minkowski 2011, p. 217.

I suspect that in order fully to understand Advaita's rise to prominence—not just in Banaras now, but across the subcontinent—we will have to look outside the received canon of Sanskrit philosophical works.<sup>10</sup> Scholarly treatments of Advaita Vedānta do not usually include, for example, the popular Maharashtrian saint Jñāneśvar (13<sup>th</sup> c.), though his works clearly bear the stamp of Śaṅkara's Vedānta.<sup>11</sup> Or consider the widely read and adapted *Adhyātma-rāmāyaṇa* (ca. late 15<sup>th</sup> c.)—another work seldom included in surveys of Vedāntic literature—which synthesizes non-dualist metaphysics with *Rāma-bhakti*, and which was one of the main sources for Tulsīdās's *Rāmcaritmānas*.<sup>12</sup> The *Tripurā-rahasya*, to take an example from a very different milieu, is a work of South India Tantra, yet its *jñāna-khaṇḍa* is deeply indebted to Advaita Vedānta.<sup>13</sup> From more recent times, take the popular saint Sai Baba of Shirdi (d. 1918), who is not considered an Advaita Vedāntin, but who often quoted from and recommended Advaitic works such as the *Yoga-vāsiṣṭha*.<sup>14</sup> These are just a handful of examples, from very different periods and milieus, of the dissemination of Advaita Vedānta—or at least of teachings inspired by Advaita—outside the received canon of Sanskrit philosophical works, a phenomenon that might be referred to as “Greater Advaita Vedānta.”

One might situate Nīścaldās's work within a series of concentric circles: the largest circle is Greater Advaita Vedānta; within Greater Advaita Vedānta, there is the neglected genre of vernacular Vedānta; within vernacular Vedānta, there are Hindi works of Vedānta; and

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<sup>10</sup> For a classic example of the “canonical” approach, see Dasgupta 1952; for an example of the continuing influence of this approach, see Deustch and Dalvi 2004. It is worth noting that the identification of Advaita Vedānta with a canon of Sanskrit philosophical texts is to some extent traceable to Advaitins themselves. Nīścaldās himself, for example, cites only Sanskrit philosophical works in *The Ocean of Inquiry*.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Talghatti 2000, pp. 545-6.

<sup>12</sup> See Allen 2011.

<sup>13</sup> For more on the *Tripurā-rahasya*, see Rigopoulos 1998, pp. 169-194.

<sup>14</sup> See Rigopoulos 1993, pp. 261-270.



within Hindi works of Vedānta, there is *The Ocean of Inquiry*. It is important to note, however, that Nīścaldās himself situates his work “squarely” within the intellectual milieu of classical Sanskrit Vedāntic tradition. As we will see in the next chapter, he was thoroughly trained in the texts of this tradition, and his intention in *The Ocean of Inquiry* was not to innovate but to make the teachings of these Sanskrit texts available to a wider audience. Although Nīścaldās belonged to the Dādū Panth, a vernacular and devotional tradition, *The Ocean of Inquiry* reads much like any Sanskrit work of Advaita Vedānta; apart from *maṅgala* verses invoking Dādū at the end of each chapter, there is nothing in the text that would clue the reader in to Nīścaldās’s sectarian identity. Since the early days of its circulation, *The Ocean of Inquiry* has been held in high regard within the Dādū Panth, but its non-sectarian character helped it achieve a popularity that crossed sectarian boundaries.

And a popular text it was: T. R. V. Murti goes so far as to claim that “The great popularity that the Advaita Vedānta enjoys in the non-scholarly world of sadhus, householders and other informed laymen is, in great measure, due to the two Hindi works of Santa Nīścaldāsa’s [sic] *Vicāra Sāgara* and *Vṛtti Prabhākara*.”<sup>15</sup> While the extent of Nīścaldās’s influence is debatable—certainly it was nowhere near the influence of Vivekananda a generation or two later—there is no doubt that Nīścaldās’s work was widely read in its day. To contextualize the popularity of his work, and the wider popularity of Advaita Vedānta in the nineteenth century, we would need to look in two directions. First, we would need to look towards the past, seeking to understand earlier phases and modes of the spread of Advaita Vedānta throughout India. When Nīścaldās set out to write an authoritative exposition of Vedānta in the vernacular, he did not need to proselytize or to “sell” his work. The prestige of Vedānta was such that the

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<sup>15</sup> “Introductory Words,” in Shrivastava 1980, p. xi.

demand was there beforehand; *The Ocean of Inquiry* was met by an already eager audiences of *sādhus* and others who wanted to study Advaita Vedānta but who were held back by not knowing Sanskrit.

The history of the popularization of Advaita Vedānta also points us forward, to the shaping of a modern, unified Hindu identity in the generations just after Niścaldās. No figure looms larger in this history than Swami Vivekananda,<sup>16</sup> who identified Vedānta as “the real backbone of Hinduism in all its various manifestations,”<sup>17</sup> and who viewed Advaita Vedānta as its loftiest expression. S. Radhakrishnan (1888 – 1975), the second president of India and author of the still widely read *The Hindu View of Life*, is but one among countless twentieth-century Indian intellectuals who held similar views. The disjunctions between classical Vedānta and the neo-Vedānta of thinkers such as Vivekananda have often been noted, but these comparisons have sometimes focused on early Advaita Vedānta, especially the thought of Śaṅkara.<sup>18</sup> In order to understand the transformations represented by neo-Vedāntic thought, one would do well to compare it not just with Śaṅkara’s thought but with contemporary (or near-contemporary) expressions of classical Advaita Vedānta; and this is precisely what a work such as *The Ocean of Inquiry* allows us to do.

So far I have pointed to the historical significance of Niścaldās’s text. Let me turn now to its significance at the level of ideas. *The Ocean of Inquiry* is a rich and rewarding text for anyone wishing to explore the philosophical and theological resources of Advaita Vedānta, and it would remain such even had it sat on a dusty shelf for a hundred and fifty years, without

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<sup>16</sup> Agehananda Bharati once went so far as to write: “Modern Hindus derive their knowledge of Hinduism from Vivekananda, directly or indirectly” (1970, p. 278).

<sup>17</sup> “Reply to the Madras Address,” *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, vol. 4, p. 280.

<sup>18</sup> See, e.g., Rambachan 1994.

attracting the wide readership that it did. The philosophy of the Upanishads has long been recognized in the West as a tradition worth “thinking alongside with,” and Advaita Vedānta continues to be engaged with constructively by contemporary scholars of comparative theology, philosophy, and mysticism. The focus of this engagement is usually Śaṅkara, the eighth-century founding figure, whose name is well known even to non-specialists. An unfortunate result of the attention to Śaṅkara, however, has been the overshadowing of other important thinkers in the tradition. To regard Advaita Vedānta as more or less synonymous with the works of Śaṅkara, as is too often done, is to ignore over a thousand years of subsequent religious and philosophical developments.

Niścaldās’s work provides an ideal vantage point for understanding these developments. To give a few examples: for centuries after the time of Śaṅkara, Advaita Vedāntins devoted considerable attention to unraveling the paradoxes of non-dualism and defending their views against philosophical objections. They raised questions about the nature, number, and locus of ignorance. They explored in depth the various metaphors used to describe the relationship between self and Brahman. They debated the nature of God. They developed highly detailed epistemologies. They elaborated theories of language, exploring both the limits and the liberating capacity of speech. They explored the nature of dreams, of time, and of space. They raised questions about the theory of karma. They synthesized elements of yoga and *bhakti* into mainstream Advaita Vedānta. All of this they did with a great deal of philosophical, theological, and hermeneutical creativity; and all of these developments are reflected in Niścaldās’s compendium.

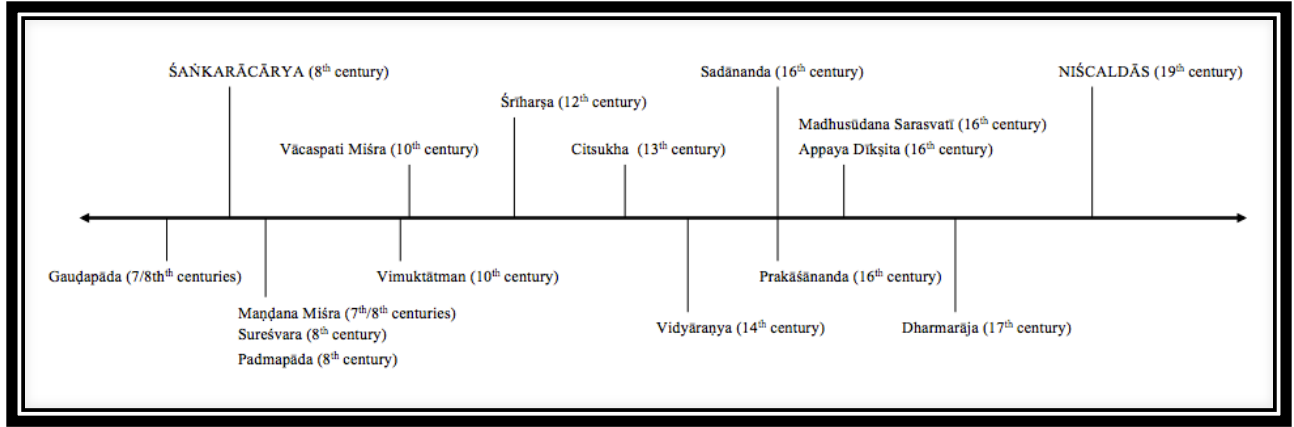


Figure 1: Major figures in Advaita Vedānta

Above (figure 1) I have provided a timeline of major figures in Advaita Vedānta from Gauḍapāda until the time of Nīścaldās.<sup>19</sup> For the countless books and articles that have been written and continue to be written about Śaṅkara, there is often only a single book-length study (if that) for many of these figures, although they were among the most brilliant thinkers of their day, and have made significant contributions to Vedāntic tradition. Again, Nīścaldās’s work is an excellent entry-point into the study of this tradition as a whole: he draws not just from Śaṅkara but from almost every major stream of later Advaita Vedānta, including the so-called “Bhāmatī” school of Maṇḍana (7th/8th century) and Vācaspatimiśra (10th century), the “Vivaraṇa” commentary of Prakāśātman (10th century), the immensely influential *Yoga Vāsiṣṭha*, the practical orientation of Mādhava Vidyāranya (14th century), the negative dialectics of Śrīharṣa (12<sup>th</sup> century), Citsukha (13th century), and Madhusūdana (16<sup>th</sup>/17<sup>th</sup>

<sup>19</sup> I have restricted the timeline to authors who have contributed to the recognized “canon” of Advaita Vedānta, as discussed in standard histories and surveys, notwithstanding my point above about the need to look beyond this canon if we are to understand the historical dissemination of Advaitic teachings. A research trajectory for improving our understanding of Advaita Vedānta and its history in India will thus take two directions: first, it must look “forward,” past Śaṅkara and his early followers and into the later Advaita tradition; second, it must look “outward” to the ways in which ideas originating with the classical or orthodox tradition spread in other forms across India.

century), the pure idealism of Prakāśānanda (16th century), and the epistemology of Dharmarāja (17th century).<sup>20</sup>

Niścaldās's work thus draws from over a thousand years of Vedāntic thought. Offering an ambitious and thorough synthesis of these earlier Vedāntic teachings, *The Ocean of Inquiry* is at once original and conservative: it is original in the sheer scope of its synthesis and in its manner of presentation, but it is conservative in that it does not seek to present “new” ideas (a questionable goal in any case for a tradition in which the goal is the realization of truths already declared in the Vedas). The conservatism of the work is in fact a boon for anyone wishing to understand late Advaita Vedānta, for the positions held by Niścaldās may be taken as representative of a wider intellectual world. At the very least, Niścaldās work provides a glimpse of Vedānta as it was taught in early nineteenth-century Banaras, where Niścaldās studied.

I should state from the outset that I am less interested in tracing the origins of particular positions included in Niścaldās's text than in understanding the worldview it expresses; in particular, I will argue that a study of *The Ocean of Inquiry* can shed important light on the role of intellectual inquiry in late Advaita Vedānta. There is, however, one instance of originality in *The Ocean of Inquiry* that is worth highlighting, and that is its literary form. The work is centered around an allegorical tale of three brothers, representing three levels of spiritual seekers: Tattvadr̥ṣṭi (“He Who Sees the Truth”), Adr̥ṣṭi (“He Who Does Not See”), and Tarkadr̥ṣṭi (“He Who Sees Arguments”). Their dialogues with a guru are the frame around which Niścaldās organizes and synthesizes the vast “ocean” of Vedāntic teachings. I will argue that the use of narrative and dialogues provides a key to understanding the role of

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<sup>20</sup> For dates of these thinkers, I have for the most part followed Karl Potter's *Bibliography of Indian Philosophies* (2012).

inquiry in Niścaldās's text; *The Ocean of Inquiry* thus rewards literary as well as philosophical analysis.

### *Reasons for its neglect*

How is it possible that a work such as *The Ocean of Inquiry* could remain so neglected? I believe there are four main reasons which together help to account for the neglect of Niścaldās's work by Western scholars: (1) linguistic shifts in modern Hindi, which make it difficult to read Niścaldās's work without special training; (2) the prestige of Sanskrit, which has led to a neglect of vernacular Vedānta; (3) the uncritically accepted view that late Advaita Vedānta contains little that is new, but instead represents a period of stagnation or decline; finally, and more generally, (4) ruts in existing research programs.

The first reason for the neglect of Niścaldās by Western scholars, and to some extent by Indian readers, too, is simple: *The Ocean of Inquiry* is hard to read. It would not have been especially difficult for an educated Hindi speaker of the nineteenth century, who would have been familiar with the language of "the Hindi classical tradition," as it has been called.<sup>21</sup> But the development of modern standard Hindi in the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries (which was based on one particular dialect among others, and which featured a relatively Sanskritized vocabulary) gradually distanced Hindi speakers from other dialects and earlier forms of the language.<sup>22</sup> When I brought the text of *The Ocean of Inquiry* to one of my Hindi teachers in Jaipur, I was told quite plainly: "This isn't Hindi." And it certainly is not modern standard Hindi. The differences are substantial enough that much of Niścaldās's text would remain incomprehensible to anyone without special training in the malleable, trans-regional

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<sup>21</sup> Snell 1991.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Trivedi 2003.

language of earlier Hindi texts. This explains why, in the second half of the twentieth century, there began to appear paraphrases or “translations” (*anuvād*) of *The Ocean of Inquiry* into modern standard Hindi.

Niścaldās chose to write in the vernacular, and this choice won his work a large audience in his day. But unlike crystallized, classical languages such as Latin or Sanskrit, vernaculars change, and sometimes quickly, especially under pressures of standardization. In Niścaldās’s day it took a specialist to read Vedāntic works in Sanskrit; today it takes a specialist to read Niścaldās. Paradoxically—or perhaps it is no paradox at all, but the very nature of vernacular writing—it was the decision to write in an accessible language that led, in large part, to the subsequent inaccessibility of Niścaldās’s work. I address questions of language in greater detail in chapter 3 of this dissertation; the point I wish to stress here is that there are not enough students and scholars today who are trained to read classical forms of Hindi.

Another reason for the neglect of Niścaldās’s work has to do with the prestige of Sanskrit. The introduction to the Sanskrit translation of *The Ocean of Inquiry* is instructive in this regard: the Sanskrit version is presented not simply as a translation but as an improvement—as if Niścaldās’s text had finally come into its own by being rendered in a language he intentionally avoided! The common picture of Advaita Vedānta, which one encounters in both Indian and Western scholarship, is that it is essentially a Sanskrit textual tradition, with a more or less clearly defined canon of works (by Śaṅkara, Sureśvara, Padmapāda, Vācaspati, etc.). There is no doubt some truth in this picture, but it is not the full picture. I believe the failure to question this received view has hindered us from understanding the full reach and development of the teachings of Advaita Vedānta. Indeed, as I also discuss in chapter 3, it has led to the neglect not simply of Niścaldās but of a much wider

tradition of Advaitic works in classical Hindi, dating back at least to the seventeenth century but so far completely unstudied.

A third reason for the neglect of *The Ocean of Inquiry* is a bias in favor of creativity and originality, where these terms are understood in unnecessarily limited ways. At its widest and most damaging level, this bias has led to entire centuries of intellectual history in South Asia being dismissed as periods of “stagnation” or “decline.” One can sometimes even encounter the remarkable claim that the tradition “ended” with Madhusūdana Sarasvatī in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>23</sup> Manuscript catalogues and even published texts tell an entirely different story. In fact, scores of new works of Advaita Vedānta continued to be composed in the succeeding centuries.<sup>24</sup> There was certainly no stagnation or decline in textual production. It is true that many of the texts produced—commentaries, sub-commentaries, sub-sub-commentaries, textbooks, and anthologies—embody different sets of intellectual values than those that a scholar trained in the modern West might hold. But the task of scholars should not be to judge prematurely—much less *a priori*—what kinds of texts are worth writing. Rather, we should begin by asking ourselves what value the thinkers of the period themselves found in the vast number of “unoriginal” works they wrote, studied, taught, commented on, and copied.<sup>25</sup>

A fourth, more general reason for the neglect of Nīścaldās has to do with ruts in research programs. The best example from my own specialty of Advaita Vedānta is the number of studies on Śaṅkara that continue to be written each year, while later figures

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<sup>23</sup> Chakraborty 2003, preface.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Minkowski 2011, pp. 205–211; see also Potter’s online *Bibliography of Indian Philosophies*.

<sup>25</sup> The “Sanskrit Knowledge Systems on the Eve of Colonialism” project, coordinated by Sheldon Pollock, has thankfully helped to reverse the longstanding bias described above, contributing immensely to our knowledge of intellectual history in early modern South Asia (though Advaita Vedānta remains underrepresented in the project).



languish in relative obscurity. Not only does this situation deprive us of potentially rich sources of philosophical and theological reflection, it inevitably distorts our understanding of the history of religion in South Asia; for how can we form any adequate notion of Advaita Vedānta as a tradition “on the ground” in South Asia unless we study what Advaitins themselves were actually reading and writing over the centuries?

The creation of ruts tends to have both an ideological and a practical dimension. In the case of Advaita Vedānta, the neglect of the post-Śaṅkara tradition is reinforced by the view that the later tradition is either decadent (later commentators fail to “get” Śaṅkara) or derivative (everything of importance is already there in Śaṅkara). Probably there is a broader bias here toward the study of founder figures over later interpreters in general, just as there is, textually, a bias toward root texts over commentaries; commentaries are perhaps dipped into from time to time when the root text is not clear, but how often are they taken as objects of study in themselves?<sup>26</sup> Then there is a practical dimension, which is perhaps even more important: the more people who study Śaṅkara, the easier it becomes to study Śaṅkara. A general consensus on authorship issues has been reached; secondary literature is extensive and reliable enough that one can be confident of understanding Śaṅkara’s philosophy without having missed anything major, and without having to go out on an interpretive limb; one is assured of having other scholars to engage with; even non-specialists can appreciate the relevance of the research; most importantly, perhaps, good editions and translations of all of Śaṅkara’s works are available. This last point is especially important: the number of scholars who are going to be attracted to a thinker will plummet immediately if there are no reliable

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<sup>26</sup> A notable exception is Clooney (1993), who argues that layers of commentary can be read together with the root text as part of a larger “Text,” which embodies “the extant form of generations of experience in reading and understanding texts” (p. 23).

translations, to say nothing of there being no printed editions of an author's corpus (which is still the case for a surprising number of Vedāntic works). Finally, there is the burden of cumulative knowledge: in order to understand a thinker, one must understand the thinkers who have gone before him. The later the thinker, the higher the bar is set. To study a late Vedāntin such as Madhusūdana Sarasvatī, for example, presupposes a thorough knowledge of Śaṅkara and the intervening tradition, not to mention some knowledge of *navya-nyāya* (itself enough to daunt an otherwise brave soul), of *dvaita-vedānta*, and of Kṛṣṇa *bhakti*.

Another rut in current research programs which is especially relevant to the case of Nīścaldās has to do with language training. To go to the effort of learning a language, one must have a sense of what the language is good for, and Sanskrit and Hindi are usually understood as being good for different things. What is Hindi good for? Certainly it is good for doing fieldwork in contemporary North India. For those interested in textual research and in earlier periods of religious history, Hindi also opens the door to the study of *bhakti* traditions. But if one is interested in Indian philosophy, Sanskrit is naturally the language one will choose, and there would seem to be little incentive (as things stand) for studying Hindi. For a long time, the classical Hindi tradition was associated almost exclusively with *bhakti* texts. Fortunately, this is beginning to change. Allison Busch, for example, has recently drawn our attention to a rich trove of Mughal-era poetic and historical texts in Braj Bhāṣā.<sup>27</sup> As scholars begin to travel outside the well-worn, rutted paths of inherited research trajectories, new vistas of study open up, with the promise of expanding, correcting, and refining our knowledge of religious and intellectual history in South Asia.

#### *Literature review*

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<sup>27</sup> *Poetry of Kings*, 2011.

In this section I will review existing research on Niścaldās, as well as the two English translations (one complete, one fragmentary) of *The Ocean of Inquiry*. There are also a number of Hindi sources on the life of Niścaldās, but I will wait until the next chapter to discuss these mainly biographical sources. Note that with the exception of a single recent article, work on Niścaldās has so far been undertaken only by scholars in India.<sup>28</sup>

The pioneering study of Niścaldās's works was S. K. Shrivastava's "The Philosophy of Niścaldāsa," his 1970 doctoral dissertation at Banaras Hindu University, subsequently published in book form as *The Essential Advaitism* (1980). Materials on Niścaldās's life—often included in introductions to editions of Niścaldās's works—had appeared before this, but Shrivastava was the first to focus Niścaldās's thought. Shrivastava's work offers a clear and accessible summary (in places virtually a paraphrase) of Niścaldās's positions in *The Ocean of Inquiry* and the *Vṛtti-prabhākar*. Shrivastava organizes these positions under the three headings of epistemology, metaphysics, and axiology (i.e. soteriology). Occasionally he compares Niścaldās's teachings with those of earlier Vedāntins, and he highlights the few "minor details" on which Niścaldās "had something new to say."<sup>29</sup> In short, Shrivastava's work has all the benefits and drawbacks of what I have come to think of as the "X's Contributions to Advaita Vedānta" genre. This genre fulfills a useful role, but it has its limits: Shrivastava focuses on Niścaldās's conclusions rather than the arguments he uses to reach them; he

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<sup>28</sup> As evidence of Niścaldās's obscurity in spite of existing studies, consider the sparse entry in Karl Potter's *Bibliography of Indian Philosophies*, which mistakenly gives Niścaldās's date as 1913 (fifty years after his death) and which—probably following an earlier mistake in Dasgupta (1932, p. 216, n. 1)—misidentifies the VP as a commentary when in fact it is an independent work. As Pahlajrai has noted (2009, p. 57), McGregor's survey *Hindi Literature from Its Beginnings to the Nineteenth Century* (1984) makes no mention of Niścaldās at all.

<sup>29</sup> P. 171.

entirely neglects the literary aspects of Niścaldās's works; and he avoids addressing puzzles and open questions in Niścaldās's thought.

More recently, Shrivastava contributed an article on "Advaita in Hindi" to the volume on Advaita Vedānta in the *History of Science, Philosophy and Culture in Indian Civilization* series (2000). The first half of the article is devoted to Niścaldās, offering a recapitulation (often verbatim) of material from Shrivastava's book. Shrivastava seems unaware of the existence of Vedāntins writing in Hindi before the time of Niścaldās, but he does make the important argument in the second half of his article that *bhakti* writers of the *sant* tradition "imprinted true Advaita on the minds of the masses through their creative writings and spiritual discourses."<sup>30</sup> Shrivastava concludes his article with a useful survey of Hindi scholarly literature on Advaita Vedānta and a brief but fascinating attempt to trace "Advaitic notes" in the works of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Hindi poets and novelists.

Raṅjīt Singh's *Sant Niścaldās: Vyaktitva aur kṛtitva* (1981) is a short (99 pages) but important contribution to our knowledge of Niścaldās. Whereas Shrivastava focuses just on Niścaldās's philosophical thought, Singh includes chapters on Niścaldās's life, thought, language and literary style, and influence. The chapters on Niścaldās's thought are organized according to topic: the nature of *vṛttis*, means to knowledge, theories of error, the nature of consciousness, theories of the *jīva*, and cosmology; these chapters consist of summary rather than analysis. By contrast, the chapters on Niścaldās's life, literary style, and influence cover new and important ground. The major drawback to Singh's book is that it lacks any scholarly apparatus: there is no bibliography and almost no citations of any of his sources.

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<sup>30</sup> P. 590.

Indu Bālā Kapil's *Sant Niścaldās aur unkī dārsānik cetanā* (2005) covers basically the same topics as Singh's book, though the treatment is much more extensive. Like Singh, she begins with Niścaldās's biography and concludes with chapters on Niścaldās's literary style and influence. She also includes two chapters on the *sant* tradition to which Niścaldās belonged, though without showing how this tradition helps us to understand Niścaldās's thought. (We know that Niścaldās was a member of the Dādū Panth, but what did this affiliation mean for him concretely?) The main chapters of Kapil's book are devoted to summaries of Niścaldās's three major works; the summary of the *Yukti-prakāś* is especially helpful, since this work is not as readily available as *The Ocean of Inquiry* and the *Vṛtti-prabhākar*.

Kamal Shivkumar's *The Philosophy of Advaita: As Expounded by Niścaldās, with Special Reference to His Vṛtti-prabhākar* (2009), the published form of her doctoral dissertation at the University of Madras, is essentially a chapter-by-chapter summary of the contents of the *Vṛtti-prabhākar* (VP). The VP is a dense work, and it has not yet been translated into English, so Shivkumar's summary can serve as a useful introduction to the text—her charts are particularly helpful—but there is no attempt at analysis, and there are occasionally glaring errors, as when Niścaldās's disciples Dayārām and Muktārām (Muktirām?) are referred to as “ladies,” or when “*prasa-jñāna*” (*prasaṃkhyāna*) is referred to as a *pramāṇa*.<sup>31</sup>

Prem Pahlajrai's essay “Vernacularisation and the Dādūpanthī Niścaldās,” published in a 2009 *Festschrift* for Monika Horstmann, is the first and only study of Niścaldās to appear outside of India. Pahlajrai is currently completing a dissertation at the University of Washington focusing on Niścaldās's *Vṛtti-prabhākar*. The first part of his essay offers an admirable overview of Niścaldās's life and three major works. The second part considers the

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<sup>31</sup> P. 24, p. 147.

applicability of Sheldon Pollock’s work on vernacularization to the case of Niścaldās, an issue I will discuss further in chapter 3 of the present dissertation. Pahlajrai offers valuable insights into the implications of Niścaldās’s choice to write in Hindi, though his larger argument about the relatively late appearance of vernacular philosophical works is undercut by the historical evidence; following Shrivastava (2000), Pahlajrai claims that “Niścaldās is the first author to write an Advaita Vedānta *prakaraṇa-grantha* (‘independent treatise’) in Hindi,” whereas in fact such works began appearing as early as the seventeenth century.<sup>32</sup>

S. Bhuvaneshwari’s recent dissertation, “The Pedagogical Concern: An Analysis of the Sanskrit *Vicārasāgara* by Vāsudeva Brahmendra Sarasvatī” (University of Madras, 2010), is a full-length study of the Sanskrit translation of Niścaldās’s work. She begins by arguing that Vāsudeva Brahmendra’s version of *The Ocean of Inquiry* is not a literal translation but a “trans-creation,” i.e. a free adaptation with abridgements, additions, and revisions of Niścaldās’s text. Nonetheless, the Sanskrit edition follows the original closely enough that most of her analysis applies equally to the Hindi version. Bhuvaneshwari’s dissertation is, refreshingly, the first study to attempt original analysis of Niścaldās’s thought. She begins with a specific problem: *The Ocean of Inquiry* presupposes but never really explains its system of classifying qualified aspirants (*adhikārī*) into three distinct categories. As Bhuvaneshwari notes, this system of classification is extremely important, since the text is structured around it: each of the main chapters is aimed at a different level of aspirant. Bhuvaneshwari helpfully draws attention to Niścaldās’s pedagogy, highlighting his view that philosophical truth must be communicated differently depending on the needs of the student. While previous scholars have tended to extract Niścaldās’s views from their pedagogical context, Bhuvaneshwari rightly insists on the

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<sup>32</sup> P. 57.

centrality of his pedagogical concerns. The question raised at the beginning of the dissertation is never really answered, however; while Bhuvaneshwari lists the different teachings given to the different levels of students, she never explains *why* these teachings should be appropriate for different kinds of people. Nonetheless, Bhuvaneshwari has done a valuable service in highlighting the central role of pedagogy in the text. She also provides several useful appendices, including charts systemizing some of Niścaldās's teachings and a glossary collecting short, lucid definitions (in Sanskrit) of key Vedāntic terms from throughout the text.

There are two translations of *The Ocean of Inquiry* into English, one complete and the other partial. Unfortunately, neither can be recommended, and a new translation of *The Ocean of Inquiry* is sorely needed.<sup>33</sup> Lala Sreeram's *Vicharsagar: The Metaphysics of the Upanishads* (1885) is still widely available, but Sreeram was neither a pandit nor a scholar, and his translation is garbled in many places. Moreover, he merges Niścaldās's verses and auto-commentary together without distinction. The opening chapter even includes a commentary by another author as if it were the work of Niścaldās. To give just a couple of examples of erroneous or misleading translations: *parokṣa-jñāna* (indirect knowledge) is consistently rendered as "invisible knowledge"; and *madhvādi* (i.e. Vaiṣṇava theologians such as Madhva, who reject non-dualist interpretations of Vedānta) becomes "Madhyamikas" (bringing new meaning to the term "crypto-Buddhist"!)." <sup>34</sup>

In 1981, B. Kutumba Rao translated portions of the first chapter of *The Ocean of Inquiry* in the pages of *Dilip*, a journal associated with the Kanchipuram *maṭha*. He includes the original Hindi *dohās*, but they contain so many obvious mistakes that one wonders whether Rao was

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<sup>33</sup> I have already completed a draft translation, which I hope to revise and annotate for publication.

<sup>34</sup> P. 17, p. 145.

not in fact translating from the Telugu and Sanskrit versions, which he mentions more than once. The translation is nonetheless lucid, and Rao's annotations are helpful, though he covers only a small fraction of Niścaldās's text.

#### *Scope and method of the present dissertation*

Much work remains to be done on Niścaldās and *The Ocean of Inquiry*, more than can be accomplished in the present dissertation. The text of *The Ocean of Inquiry* runs over three hundred pages in printed editions, and I cannot hope to do justice to all of that material here. Nor will it be possible for me to address in any detail the larger history of Advaita Vedānta to which I referred above. I do hope, however, that the present study will help pave the way for additional studies, both of Niścaldās specifically and of Advaita Vedānta more broadly. To that end, I have divided this dissertation into two parts. The first part offers a historical and textual overview which, while not exhaustive, should lay a solid groundwork for future research. I provide a comprehensive biography of Niścaldās, correcting a number of oft-repeated errors in the existing literature, and I supply an annotated list of his published and unpublished works; I analyze the language of the text and the significance of Niścaldās's choice to write in Hindi; I discuss sources and models on which he drew; and I provide a synopsis of the text.

The second part of this dissertation offers a detailed study of the central theme of Niścaldās's text: the role of intellectual inquiry (*vicāra*) on the path to liberation. I have noted that *The Ocean of Inquiry* is a compendium of Advaita Vedānta. It is also, for Niścaldās, a profoundly practical text; its purpose, he states from the outset, is to lead to liberation, understood as the complete removal of suffering and the attainment of perfect bliss. Although he stresses the goal of liberation throughout the text, a modern reader might be hard pressed to see the practical relevance of many of the discussions in *The Ocean of Inquiry*. Indeed, if one



comes to Niścaldās's work looking for a lyrical celebration of mystical experience, one will quickly be disappointed. The vast majority of the text is prose commentary, and it reads like what it is: a work of philosophy—and “scholastic” philosophy at that, responding to centuries of inherited debates, seeking to answer objections and reconcile contradictions, and drawing on a highly technical vocabulary. The following passage, which considers an objection to the well-known rope-snake analogy, suffices to give a taste:

Objection: Even though the removal of the snake is possible through an awareness of the rope, nevertheless, the removal of the *awareness* of the snake is not possible, since the substratum of the snake is consciousness delimited by the rope, [while] the substratum of the awareness of the snake is the Witness-consciousness. In accordance with what has already been said, through an awareness of the rope there is a revealing of consciousness delimited by the rope but not of the Witness-consciousness. Therefore, despite there being an awareness of the rope, the Witness-consciousness, which is the substratum of the awareness of the snake, will remain unknown, and there cannot be the removal of an imaginary [object] when its substratum is unknown. ...<sup>35</sup>

This is not, perhaps, what one would expect from a runaway best-seller today! But that is precisely what makes *The Ocean of Inquiry* worth studying. Late Advaita Vedānta is sometimes dismissed as a mere scholasticism divorced from the concerns of everyday religious practice. Śaṅkara, we are told, was concerned with the practical goal of liberation; later Vedāntins, by contrast, tended to lose themselves in abstract and fruitless theories. This reading of Vedānta, however, is but a projection of modern prejudices. I will argue that Niścaldās provides a clear example of a late Advaitin for whom sometimes highly technical theories were neither abstract nor fruitless, but concretely related to the goal of liberation.

As Busch has argued in the case of classical Hindi poets, we need to “take our cues not from modern commentators, whose analyses are riven by anachronistic and ill-informed biases, but Brajghosa writers, trying to understand what they themselves thought they were

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<sup>35</sup> VS 4.50 comm., p. 79.

doing.”<sup>36</sup> This is the approach I would advocate for understanding late Advaita Vedānta, too. What did Nīścaldās himself think he was doing in writing *The Ocean of Inquiry*? How exactly is the process of inquiry (which, I will argue, is exemplified throughout the text) supposed to lead to liberation? The word *vicāra*, or “inquiry,” could also be translated simply as “reflection” or “thought,” so I could pose my question more broadly as follows: for Nīścaldās, can we think our way to liberation? More broadly still (and assuming provisionally that the categories are applicable here), what is the relationship between philosophy and religious practice for Nīścaldās? Answering this question should help shed light on the intellectual values of late Advaita Vedānta more broadly, showing how seemingly abstract philosophy need not be divorced from concrete practices and religious ends.

My method for approaching this question is to begin not with philosophy but with a story: a story of three princes who leave their father’s palace and take refuge with a guru. Their story is the frame around which *The Ocean of Inquiry* is organized; each of the three brothers has his own chapter in which he poses questions to the guru. The story has a happy ending: the eldest and the youngest achieve liberation in the course of the narrative, while the middle brother secures a guarantee of liberation in the future. Focusing on this narrative allows us to pose the question not just theoretically but concretely (at least as concretely as fiction allows): how does liberation come about? Take, for example, the eldest brother, Tattvadr̥ṣṭi (“Truth-seer”). At the beginning of chapter four of *The Ocean of Inquiry*, he is suffering and confused; by the end of the chapter he has realized his identity with Brahman. What changes in him between the beginning of his dialogue with the guru and the end? And why don’t his brothers, who are also present for this dialogue, receive liberation at the end of

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<sup>36</sup> 2009, p. 14.

the chapter, too? For that matter, why does the youngest brother, whom Niścaldās identifies as possessing only the lowest level of qualification (*kaniṣṭha-adhikāra*), go on to achieve the goal of liberation in life, while the middle brother, though of a higher level of qualification (*madhyama-adhikāra*), achieves only the lesser goal of liberation in the next life?

Niścaldās does not answer these questions directly. In fact, he does not even raise them. His primary interest seems to have been in the content of the dialogues, which provide a convenient framework for presenting Vedāntic teachings; in the course of their questions and answers, the guru and the three brothers cover every major topic of Advaita philosophy, and many minor ones besides. One method for studying Niścaldās’s thought would be to focus on this philosophical content, culling his explicit statements on the role of knowledge (*jñāna*) on the path to liberation, and perhaps tracing them to earlier sources or comparing them with the statements of other Vedāntins. This method—the “summarize-and-trace” method—has serious drawbacks in the present case. First, it has already been followed by earlier authors; not much could be added to the existing work of Shrivastava, Singh, and Kapil in this regard. Second, to focus only on the philosophical content (which is not, after all, so new) would be to overlook the immensely creative form of Niścaldās’s work. Finally, although the summarize-and-trace method can give us Niścaldās’s views on *knowledge* and liberation, it cannot tell us much about his views on *inquiry* and liberation, for the simple and surprising reason that he in fact has very little to say about *vicāra*. I hope to argue that the whole of *The Ocean of Inquiry* is itself an enactment of his vision of *vicāra*; but this is a different kind of analysis than the summarize-and-trace method.

Instead of asking questions that are already answered in the text, my method here will be to step back and ask what views are presupposed or implied by the text, even if they are not

spelled out explicitly. I will still make use of the obvious passages on knowledge and liberation; but I will also draw freely from passages that might at first appear unrelated. By bringing together scattered and sometimes peripheral teachings from throughout the text and by attending to the form as well as the content of *The Ocean of Inquiry*, I believe one can find solutions to the puzzles surrounding the story of the three brothers. Solving these puzzles will in turn shed light on my starting question concerning Niścaldās's understanding of the role of intellectual inquiry on the path to liberation.

The preliminary materials in Part I can stand alone; they are intended to provide background on Niścaldās and *The Ocean of Inquiry*, but they do not address Niścaldās's teachings. By contrast, the three chapters which form Part II offer a close reading of the text, building on one another to develop a sustained argument about the relationship of philosophy to religious practice. By the final chapter, the reader should have a clear sense of the meaning and role of *vicāra* in Niścaldās's thought, as well as (I hope) a deeper respect for the intellectual values of the scholasticism his work represents. As we will see, for Niścaldās there need not be a distinction between theoretical knowledge and liberative knowledge. Under the right conditions, seemingly abstract intellectual inquiry can become a concrete religious practice; indeed, for those who are properly qualified, it is *the* central practice on the path to liberation.

#### *Chapter-by-chapter outline*

This introduction (chapter 1) is followed by two free-standing chapters intended to lay groundwork for further research on Niścaldās. These three chapters together form Part I of the present dissertation, providing a historical and textual overview of Niścaldās and *The Ocean of Inquiry*.

In chapter 2, I offer the first full biography of Niścaldās in English. There are many Hindi-language sources on Niścaldās's life, but with few exceptions the core of reliable facts is sunk in a morass of conflicting information, speculative embellishment, and errors repeated uncritically from source to source. My goal is to provide the most comprehensive and accurate biography possible, bringing together in one place everything we know about Niścaldās and noting false or questionable claims in the existing literature, so that others might avoid these mistakes. I have given special attention to Niścaldās's relationship to the Dādū Panth, to his period of Sanskrit studies in Banaras, to his role as a teacher, and to the patronage he received from Mahārāj Rām Singh of Bundi, since these are especially important for contextualizing his written works. I have also provided a full survey of Niścaldās's works (published and unpublished, in Hindi and Sanskrit), and I have attempted to date the composition of *The Ocean of Inquiry*.

In chapter 3, I offer an overview of the text of *The Ocean of Inquiry*. First, I explore the language of the text, beginning with Niścaldās's stated motive for writing in "bhāṣā" (vernacular) and then contextualizing his work in light of wider processes of vernacularization in North India. I then move to an analysis of the particular dialects used in the verses and the commentary, showing that one can in fact identify three linguistic strands in *The Ocean of Inquiry*. I use this analysis to complicate the dichotomy between Sanskrit and "the vernacular," arguing that Niścaldās was in fact engaging with classical Hindi as well as classical Sanskrit traditions. Third, I look at sources and models for *The Ocean of Inquiry*. In addition to considering the Sanskrit materials from which Niścaldās drew, I draw attention to the existence of a previously neglected genre of South Asian religious texts: vernacular Vedānta in

early modern North India. I conclude chapter 3 (and Part I) with a synopsis of *The Ocean of Inquiry*.

Chapters 4-6, which together form Part II of this dissertation, build on one another to offer an argument about Niścaldās's understanding of the role of intellectual inquiry on the path to liberation. Chapter 4 lays the groundwork for this argument by presenting Niścaldās's epistemology. I begin by explaining why epistemology is so important for Advaita Vedāntins, and I argue that for Niścaldās, the kind of knowledge that liberates exists on a continuum with everyday knowledge. After defining key terms (*jñāna*, *pramāṇa*, *cit*, *vṛtti*, etc.), I then use passages from *The Ocean of Inquiry* to explore the idealist epistemology of late Advaita Vedānta. I make an original argument for a dimension of Vedāntic epistemology which has hitherto gone unnoticed: what might be termed "material epistemology," in contrast to the "instrumental epistemology" with which the better-known *pramāṇa*-framework is concerned. Niścaldās's epistemology connects this *pramāṇa*-framework with a material *guṇa*-theory, rather as a contemporary philosopher of mind might try to connect a theory of knowledge with the data of cognitive science. I argue that this material epistemology helps explain the importance of the qualifications (*adhikāra*) which are traditionally set forth for students of Vedānta. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of two epistemological topics which further set the stage for the following chapter: the distinction between strong and weak awareness, and the problem of epistemic conflict.

Chapter 5 focuses on Niścaldās's understanding of the path to liberation. First I discuss the list of qualifications which seekers of liberation are supposed to meet before studying Vedānta, and I explore the logic behind them, again pointing to the importance of "material epistemology." Then I turn to the threefold path of *śravaṇa*, *manana*, and *nididhyāsana* (hearing,

reflection, and meditation) as Niścaldās understands them. Building on the epistemology in chapter 4, I show how for Niścaldās, the concrete practices of this threefold path do not involve accomplishing anything positive so much as removing obstacles. The main obstacles are intellectual, and the way to remove them is through inquiry: the dialectical process of raising and responding to doubts. This, I argue, is the very heart of Niścaldās’s work, and it is what he sees as the central practice on the path to liberation. After examining a parallel between Niścaldās’s view of *vicāra* and the classical Naiyāyika view of *vāda* (truth-seeking debate), I also consider what *The Ocean of Inquiry* has to say about meditation and yoga. I suggest that a degree of unresolved tension within the text—between an intellectualist approach and a yogic approach to liberation—reflects a wider tension within Advaita tradition, and I argue that Niścaldās for his part is firmly in the intellectualist camp, while still seeing a place for practices of meditation and yoga.

Chapter 6 focuses on pedagogy. Niścaldās emphasizes that the practice of inquiry must take place under the guidance of a skilled teacher. What does this process look like in practice? I begin by focusing on the literary form of *The Ocean of Inquiry*, the central chapters of which are dialogues between a teacher and his students, and which are themselves embedded in a larger narrative. I argue that it is important to attend not just to what Niścaldās is saying in these chapters—the philosophical conclusions—but to how he is saying it, and to whom. From this literary perspective, *The Ocean of Inquiry* stands out as a highly original, creative text. Focusing on the dialogues and narrative also leads to an important qualification to the conclusions in the preceding chapter: inquiry is indeed the central practice on the path to liberation, but the process of inquiry will be different for different people. The remainder of the chapter consists of “case studies,” looking at characters in *The Ocean of Inquiry* who attain

liberation, and showing how their particular stories help to illustrate Niścaldās's epistemology and his understanding of the path to liberation.

In the Conclusion to this dissertation, I begin by summarizing the argument developed in chapters 4-6 about the nature of inquiry and its role on the path to liberation, and I argue further that Niścaldās's understanding of *vicāra* calls into question too sharp a distinction between philosophy and religious practice. For Niścaldās, "philosophical" inquiry is essential for liberation, but it will not bear fruit apart from the prior performance of certain "religious" practices. From another perspective, I go on to argue, one could say that inquiry itself becomes a kind of spiritual practice for Niścaldās. I conclude by suggesting that this vision of the close relationship of inquiry to religious practice offers a model for reevaluating the scholasticism of late Advaita Vedānta.



## CHAPTER 2

### The Life and Works of Niścaldās

*Sources on the life of Niścaldās — Birth and early years — Affiliation with the Dādū Panth — Early education — Banaras, city of pandits— Life in Kihaḍaulī — Niścaldās as a teacher — The library at Kihaḍaulī — Composing The Ocean of Inquiry — Other works by Niścaldās — Guru to a king — Travels in Rajasthan — Final years — Conclusions*

#### *Sources on the life of Niścaldās*

Details about the life of Niścaldās (ca. 1791 – 1863) are either sparse or abundant, depending on the sources one accepts. As Sūrat-rām Dādū has noted, there are only a few materials dating from the time of Niścaldās himself: two short letters in Sanskrit from the Mahārāj of Bundi; a letter in Hindi, composed by two of Niścaldās’s disciples shortly after their master’s death; and a few autobiographical references from Niścaldās’s own works.<sup>37</sup> A biography of our author does emerge from these few sources, but only in vague outline. For a fuller account, we must turn to oral reports. These reports should be approached with caution, however, since they were not committed to writing until well after Niścaldās’s death, and they often contradict one another. Moreover, the original sources of the reports are almost never given, which means one does not know how close (if at all) the informant was to Niścaldās, or how much a particular anecdote might have changed in the course of its transmission. My intention in this chapter is to provide as complete a biography of Niścaldās as possible, and so I will draw from these reports as well as from the documentary evidence; but in telling the story of his life I will try to distinguish as much as possible between what can be known reliably and what remains merely conjectural.

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<sup>37</sup> Dādū 1994, p. 22. —These materials will be discussed at length below. Nārāyaṇdās (vol. 2, p. 839) seems to suggest that Niścaldās’s name is also mentioned in *melā* attendance records of the Dādū Panth for *saṃvat* 1890-1. It is furthermore possible that some archival trace of Niścaldās is preserved at the royal palace in Bundi; this remains an avenue for future research.

Below is a descriptive list of the sources I have consulted, in chronological order from date of publication:

1. SĀLEMAHAMMAD (1874<sup>38</sup>): The earliest account of Nīścaldās's life that I have been able to find is a five-page sketch in Śarīf Sālemahammad's introduction (*prastāvanā*) to his 1874 edition of the *Vicār-sāgar* (VS), which appeared just eleven years after Nīścaldās's death.<sup>39</sup> "My thought was to write a complete biography of Śrī Nīścaldās-jī to include with this edition," writes Sālemahammad, "but since I did not have the means to do so, I have written down here what has come to my hearing."<sup>40</sup> He does not name his sources, unfortunately, but we do know that Sālemahammad had a close relationship with Pītāmbār, the author of the gloss (*tippan*) on VS.<sup>41</sup> Sālemahammad laments that his biography remains "very much incomplete," but it nonetheless provides a valuable, non-chronological sketch of major events in Nīścaldās's life.<sup>42</sup>

2. TRIPĀṬHĪ (1914): The 1914 edition of Nīścaldās's *Yukti-prakāś* includes a six-page account of Nīścaldās's life, with a note that it was taken from Manassukhrām Sūryarām

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<sup>38</sup> All dates are C.E. unless otherwise noted (as will often be the case for *saṃvat* dates).

<sup>39</sup> There is a great deal of confusion surrounding Sālemahammad's version of the VS, which went through multiple editions and reprints. The Khemraj Shrikrishnadass edition (see Nīścaldās 2003), which is today the most widely available edition of the VS, appears to be a reprint of Sālemahammad's sixth edition. At some point between the publication of the 1874 edition and the Khemraj Shrikrishnadass reprint, Sālemahammad's name was removed from the title page, and his initials were removed from the end of the introduction and replaced with the words *prasiddha-kartā* ("the publisher"). Dādū (1994) misattributes the introduction to Pītāmbār, likely as a result of this change. Note that the 1874 edition does not yet include Pītāmbār's gloss, which was added only later. —I have not yet been able to determine when *The Ocean of Inquiry* was first printed. The online catalogue of the Oriental and India Office Collections of the British Library lists an 1868 lithographed edition (British Library shelfmark 279/50.G.12) that I have not yet been able to obtain.

<sup>40</sup> P. 7.

<sup>41</sup> Pītāmbār in turn knew *sādhu* Trilok-rām, who had studied with Nīścaldās; see Sālemahammad 1874, pp. 14-5 (and cf. Nīścaldās 2003, p. 9, n. 1). Sālemahammad wrote a biography of Pītāmbār—whom he seems to have regarded as his guru—which is included in his fifth edition (and subsequent editions) of Pītāmbār's *Vicār-candroday*. He is also the author of an articulate English-language article, "Ultimate Truths of Vedānta: Illustrated by Extracts" (Sālemahammad 1906). For a photographic portrait of Sālemahammad, see the front matter of Nīścaldās 2003.

<sup>42</sup> P. 11.

Tripāṭhī's edition of the VS, which perhaps dates to 1876.<sup>43</sup> Tripāṭhī gives considerably more details than Sālemahammad, and many of these details seem to have been picked up by later authors.

3. CATURVEDĪ (1951/2, 1964/5): Paraśurām Caturvedī includes a short life of Niścaldās in his book *Uttarī bhārat kī sant paramparā* (published *saṃvat* 2008; revised edition, *saṃvat* 2021).<sup>44</sup> Caturvedī's claims are frequently repeated (with or without citation) by later authors, which is unfortunate, since the biography has many errors, as will become clear below.

4. NĀRĀYAṆDĀS (1979?): The most complete and probably the most influential account of Niścaldās's life is the biography, or rather hagiography, included in volume two of Swāmī Nārāyaṇdās's *Śrī Dādū panth paricay*. Nārāyaṇdās's account reflects memories of Niścaldās as preserved within the Dādū Panth. Not surprisingly, Nārāyaṇdās stresses Niścaldās's connection with the Panth more than other writers. He includes many colorful details that are not to be found elsewhere, including a description of Niścaldās's daily routine. Nārāyaṇdās does not cite his sources, however, and most of the information he states matter-of-factly cannot be verified. In at least one case that will be discussed below (the initial letter of Mahārāj Rām Singh of Bundi to Niścaldās), it is clear how the oral reports on which Nārāyaṇdās relied were

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<sup>43</sup> Cf. Blumhardt's *Catalogue of the Library of the India Office* (1888, p. 257), which mentions a Gujarati translation of *The Ocean of Inquiry* by Tripāṭhī (Bombay, 1876).

<sup>44</sup> His life of Niścaldās seems to have first appeared in a September 1949 special issue (*Sant-vāṇī aṅk*) of the Hindi-language periodical *Kalyāṇ*. —There are only two notable differences between the 1951/2 version and the 1964/5 revised version of Caturvedī's life of Niścaldās: in the revised version, Niścaldās is said to have studied metrics in Banaras under "Ras-puñj-jī" instead of "Das-puñj-jī," and an approximate date of composition is added for *The Ocean of Inquiry*. (Note that the date given—*saṃvat* 1914—is definitely too late; see the discussion of dating later in this chapter.)

sometimes freely “embellished.” Nonetheless, Nārāyaṇdās’s account is an invaluable resource, when read with caution.<sup>45</sup>

5. SINGH (1981): Ranjīt Singh’s *Sant Niścaldās: Vyaktitva aur kṛtitva* is the first full-length scholarly treatment of Niścaldās’s life and works. His biography is an invaluable resource, if only for its inclusion of the text of the two Sanskrit letters from the Mahārāj of Bundi and the Hindi letter from Niścaldās’s disciples. The rest of the biography is uneven. It begins with admirable thoroughness and a critical approach; for example, the discussion of Niścaldās’s place of birth surveys four possibilities mentioned by earlier authors, weighing each possibility carefully before concluding which of the four is most likely. By the end of his biography, however, Singh’s approach reverts to that of other authors, making claims matter-of-factly without citation or argument.

6. DVĀRIKĀDĀS (1989): In the preface to his edition of the VS, Dvārikādās Śāstrī provides some helpful information on early manuscripts of the VS; his own edition is based on the earliest known manuscript, dated *saṃvat* 1905. He also provides a chronological table of major events in the life of Niścaldās, but the chronology includes gross errors (such as the claim that the VS was written after the *Vṛtti-prabhākar*, when in fact the latter refers to the VS several times). Perhaps most interestingly, he gives us insight into the process of the oral transmission and eventual recording of Niścaldās’s life. Dvārikādās recalls that in his youth, he attended a gathering at the Dādū Mahāvidyālaya in Jaipur in the summer of 1939.<sup>46</sup> During this

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<sup>45</sup> For more on Nārāyaṇdās and the significance of his work within the Dādū Panth, see Hastings 2002, pp. 24-5. Writing of his work with Dādū-panthī informants while researching the history of the Panth’s *nāga* order, Hastings remarks: “Often when I would inquire about any point of Dadupanthi history, I would simply be told to go and read the works of Nārāyaṇdās, for everything of importance in the history of the community would be found there” (p. 160). I had a similar experience during my own fieldwork searching for information on Niścaldās in Rajasthan in 2006.

<sup>46</sup> P. 11.

event, scholars and *mahātmās* of the *sampradāy* would regularly give sermons on *sant* literature, drawing especially from the *Dādū-vāṇī*, but referring also to other luminaries of the Dādū Panth, including Niścaldās. Chief among those in attendance, Dvārikādās recalls, was the aged *mahant* Cetanādev-jī Mahārāj, who as a child had *darśan* of Niścaldās at *melās* and other gatherings within the Panth, and who had heard Niścaldās speak on occasion. Dvārikādās's guru, Maṅgaldās, took notes on Cetanādev's speeches, which included stories about the life of Niścaldās; these stories later provided a basis for a biographical sketch by Maṅgaldās—apparently included in a 1953 edition of the *Vicār-sāgar*, which I have not been able to obtain—on which Dvārikādās in turn based his chronology.<sup>47</sup>

Here we at least have a relatively clear stream of oral transmission, and also a clear example of how problematic such transmission can be. The stories about Niścaldās are already close to second-hand by the time they reached Cetanādev, who was after all still a child when he saw Niścaldās. His stories about Niścaldās were doubtless stories he re-told over the years, and probably not solely his own recollections but mixed with other stories he had heard about Niścaldās. It is also worth noting that these stories, as Maṅgaldās encountered them, were told in a sectarian and homiletical setting. They were not committed to writing until 1939, more than seventy-five years after Niścaldās's death, and even then only as unpublished notes. Finally, drawing from these notes, Maṅgaldās published his biography of Niścaldās some fourteen years later. Such biographies can tell us a great deal about the memories of Niścaldās as preserved and transmitted in the Dādū Panth, but as historical records they should be approached with due caution.

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<sup>47</sup> Upādhyāya (1994, pp. 182-3) also offers a brief sketch of Niścaldās's life drawn from Maṅgaldās's account.

7. DĀDŪ (1994): Sūrat-rām Dādū's edition of the VS includes a 40-page study of Niścaldās's life (in Hindi) which is the most scholarly biography available. His study consists of a comparison and analysis of the six sources listed above (except for #2), and he attempts as much as possible to separate facts from conjecture. According to Dādū, not much can be known with certainty about Niścaldās's life; “*is kā koī ṭhos pramāṇ nahim hai*” (“there is no certain evidence of this”) is a constant refrain of his study. Nonetheless, he includes many details which he finds probable if not certain, and he provides arguments against the claims he finds implausible. The result is an admirably thorough biography, and my own approach will closely follow his.

8. KAPIL (2005): Indu Bālā Kapil's book *Sant Niścaldās aur unkī dārsanik cetanā* includes a 12-page chapter on the life of Niścaldās. She does not always cite her sources, and her life of Niścaldās repeats several errors from earlier accounts, but her chapter nonetheless includes a few details not readily available elsewhere.<sup>48</sup>

9. PAHLAJRAI (2009): The first significant source in English on the life of Niścaldās is a recent article by Prem Pahlajrai, “Vernacularisation and the Dādūpanthī Niścaldās.” (Pahlajrai is currently writing a dissertation at the University of Washington on the *Vṛtti-prabhākar*, Niścaldās's other major work). Pahlajrai's sketch is brief (the biography proper is just three pages) but engagingly written and mostly reliable, and it adds to the existing Hindi literature by including valuable details on Niścaldās's patron, Mahārāj Rām Singh of Bundi.

10. BHUVANESHWARI (2010): S. Bhuvaneshwari's recent dissertation (in English) for the University of Madras, focusing on the Sanskrit translation of the VS, includes some valuable information on the influence of Niścaldās's works on later authors and translators.

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<sup>48</sup> Her sources include a few articles from Hindi-language periodicals and one preface from an edition of the VS which I have not been able to obtain.

She also includes a one-page sketch of Niścaldās's life, based on the introduction from a 1992 edition of the VS in modern Hindi.

### *Birth and early years*

All sources agree that Niścaldās was born in north India towards the end of the eighteenth century, probably not far from Delhi, in what is today the modern state of Haryana. Neither the place nor the year of his birth can be known with certainty, though there are reports regarding both. Raṇjīt Singh has convincingly argued in favor of the tradition that Niścaldās was born in the village of Dhanāṇā, in the district of Bhivānī, approximately 100 kilometers northwest of Delhi; according to Sūrat-rām Dādū, this is also the tradition accepted within the Dādū Panth.<sup>49</sup> As for the date of his birth, the general consensus points to *saṃvat* 1848, or 1791/2 C.E., but again, there is no solid evidence for this date.<sup>50</sup>

Most sources report that Niścaldās was a *jāṭ* by caste.<sup>51</sup> Some sources further identify his father as a farmer, giving his name as “Muktā” or “Mukt-jī.”<sup>52</sup> A commonly reported story has it that Niścaldās's mother died when he was young.<sup>53</sup> Niścaldās seems to have been an only child, and his father decided to leave Dhanāṇā and head to nearby Delhi, taking his son with

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<sup>49</sup> Singh 1981, pp. 1-3; Dādū 1994, p. 23. —Singh gives Niścaldās's birth-name as Agarī (p. 5), but he does not cite his source.

<sup>50</sup> Tripāṭhī (1914) gives *saṃvat* 1849 and goes so far as to give an exact date, saying that Niścaldās was born on *śrāvaṇ kṛṣṇa* 8, i.e. on Kṛṣṇa-janmāṣṭamī (Kṛṣṇa's birthday).

<sup>51</sup> The *jāṭ*s are “north India's major non-elite ‘peasant’ caste” (Bayly 2001, p. 385) and have played an important role in the history of the Dādū Panth (Hasting 2002).

<sup>52</sup> According to Singh (p. 3), there still exists a line of “Muktā”s in the village of Dhanāṇā to the present day, though Dādū (p. 23) states that no specific memory of Niścaldās or his family is currently preserved in Dhanāṇā.

<sup>53</sup> The story appears as early as Tripāṭhī (1914, p. 6).

him. Singh adds that a drought had made conditions difficult for the village, and Niścaldās's father was unable to support himself and his son.<sup>54</sup>

#### *Affiliation with the Dādū Panth*

Against the speculation surrounding Niścaldās's early years, one fact stands out as not only the most certain but also the most significant: at some point in his youth, Niścaldās received initiation as a *sādhu* of the Dādū Panth, a religious order tracing back to the sixteenth-century Rajasthani *sant* Dādū Dayāl.<sup>55</sup> According to Singh, Niścaldās's father, arriving in Delhi, found his way to a branch of the Panth in the Bhavānī Śaṅkar *chattā* (alley or lane) of the Khārī Bāvalī Bazaar.<sup>56</sup> Nārāyaṇdās reports that the superintendent's name was Amardās, though other sources give his name as Alakhrām.<sup>57</sup> According to Singh, father and son stayed there for a while, and Amardās (or Alakhrām), deeply impressed with the boy's intelligence, asked Niścaldās's father to dedicate his son to him as *dakṣiṇā* (the payment one offers to a guru in return for instruction).<sup>58</sup> Niścaldās was then initiated into the Panth as a renunciate.<sup>59</sup> According to the genealogy given by Sūrat-rām Dādū, Niścaldās was thus an eighth-generation disciple of Dādū Dayāl:

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<sup>54</sup> P. 4. —The *Manual of the Administration of the Madras Presidency* (vol. 2, 1885, p. 470) reports a drought in the general region in 1803, which would fit the timeline well, with Niścaldās about 12 years old at the time.

<sup>55</sup> For a study and translation of the traditional life of Dādū, see Callewaert 1988).

<sup>56</sup> 1981, p. 5.

<sup>57</sup> Nārāyaṇdās, vol. 2, p. 834; cf. Singh 1981, p. 5. —Dādū (following Nārāyaṇdās) records that Amardās was a disciple of a certain Alakhdās (p. 27), who might perhaps be the Alakhrām mentioned in other sources.

<sup>58</sup> 1981, p. 5. —It was by no means uncommon at the time for talented children to be handed over to the Panth (Monika Horstmann, personal communication, August 2011).

<sup>59</sup> Singh 1981, p. 5. —According to Nārāyaṇdās, Niścaldās's father also became a Dādū-panthī renunciate (vol. 2, p. 834).



Dādū Dayāl -> Banvārīdās -> Chabīldās -> Śyāmdās -> Nārāyaṇdās -> Bhakt -> Alakhdās -> Amardās -> Niścaldās<sup>60</sup>

The Dādū Panth has always been centered in Rajasthan, but already in the generation of Dādū Dayāl's disciples, it had spread across north India. By the time of Niścaldās, there were institutional centers (*akhārās*, *dvārās*, *maṭhs*) affiliated with the Panth across North India, including locations in Bhivānī (the district in which Niścaldās was probably born), Delhi (where Niścaldās was received into the Panth), and Banaras (where Niścaldās would go for Sanskrit studies).<sup>61</sup> These centers, and the streams of *sādhus* moving between them, no doubt later played an important role in the circulation of his works.

Biographers of Niścaldās writing from within the Dādū Panth have wrestled with the fact that, despite Niścaldās's undoubted affiliation with the Panth, his works reveal little direct influence from Dādū-panthī doctrine; they belong instead to the classical Sanskrit tradition of Advaita Vedānta, more often associated with *daśanāmī sannyāsīs* than with *sants*.<sup>62</sup> In this regard, it is useful to compare Niścaldās's works with those of Sundardās (17<sup>th</sup> c.), one of Dādū Dayāl's most famous disciples, whose intellectual formation was in some ways similar to Niścaldās's: Sundardās, too, had immersed himself in Sanskrit studies in Banaras and was deeply influenced by Advaita Vedānta.<sup>63</sup> The thread of Vedāntic teachings is not nearly as central in Sundardās's writings as in Niścaldās's, however. Sundardās's works belong rather, primarily, to the traditions of north Indian *bhakti* associated with poets such as Dādū, Kabīr,

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<sup>60</sup> Dādū 1994, p. 27.

<sup>61</sup> For details on these institutional centers, see Nārāyaṇdās's *Śrī Dādū Panth paricay*.

<sup>62</sup> For more on the *daśanāmīs* (the ten renunciate orders which trace their lineages back to Ādī Śaṅkarācārya), see Cenker 1983 and Clark 2006.

<sup>63</sup> For more on Sundardās, including selected translations from his works, see Thiel-Horstmann 1983.

and Ravidās, who emphasize devotion, egolessness, company with the good (*satsaṅga*), and guidance from a *guru* as the means to an inward encounter with Rām (understood in this context not as the *avatār* of Viṣṇu and hero of the *Rāmāyaṇa* but as the formless Lord of all). Nīścaldās’s works, in contrast to those of Sundardās, never quote the poems of the *sants* and rarely mention *bhakti*. Intellectually, Nīścaldās situates himself squarely within the tradition of Śaṅkara’s Vedānta. Nonetheless, there are signs of his Dādū-panthī affiliation even within the VS, and these are worth examining closely.

The first place to look for signs of sectarian identity is usually the *maṅgalācaraṇa*, or benedictory verses that open a work. Nīścaldās begins the VS with five such verses, but they are not what one would expect from a Dādū-panthī writer. There is no mention of Dādū, no mention of the *sants*, and no homage paid to Rām. Instead, each of the five verses is an invocation of the formless self.<sup>64</sup> “Blissful, eternal, luminous, pervasive ... I am That,” the first verse proclaims, echoing language from the Upanishads.<sup>65</sup> The second verse includes the names of several deities (Viṣṇu, Maheśa, Vidhi [Brahmā], etc.), but they are described as mere “waves” on the boundless ocean of the self.<sup>66</sup> The third verse mentions the Supreme Lord (“That gracious, all-knowing [one] / Upon whom sages meditate in their hearts”), but only to identify him as “an unreal appearance within me.”<sup>67</sup> The fifth verse concludes the *maṅgalācaraṇa* in the same bold spirit:

[1.5] That Rām whom the virtuous desire to know, worshiping him without attachment:

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<sup>64</sup> Much later in the VS, Nīścaldās explains that there are three types of *maṅgalācaraṇa*: (1) *vastu-nirdeśa*, in which the author sings the praises of the supreme self; (2) *āśīra-vāda*, in which the author prays for some desired object; and (3) *namas-kāra*, in which the author pays homage to a deity (VS 6B.12, p. 206). The five verses that open the VS clearly belong to the first category.

<sup>65</sup> VS 1.1, p. 1.

<sup>66</sup> VS 1.2, p. 1.

<sup>67</sup> VS 1.3, p. 1.

He is my self. To whom should I bow down?<sup>68</sup>

The commentary recorded by Pandit Pītāmbār<sup>69</sup> frames this verse as a response to an imagined objection: “The benedictory verses ought to include homage to Śrī Rām-jī, who is the chosen deity (*iṣṭa-deva*) in the *sampradāy* of Dādū-jī, who is the guru of your tradition (*tumāre paramparā-guru*).”<sup>70</sup> Likewise, the commentary on the verse explains: “[I]n the *sampradāy* of Dādū Dayāl-jī, Rām-jī is the formless Brahman.”<sup>71</sup> Note, however, that the verse is not exactly an eager embrace of sectarian identity. Rather than paying homage to Rām, the verse asks: “To whom should I dedicate verses of homage, when I myself am the supreme reality?”

Nīścaldās’s choice to open his work without invoking any sectarian deity likely reflects his desire to reach a wide audience, including readers outside the Dādū Panth, and to situate the VS as an authoritative work of Advaita Vedānta. Nonetheless, Nīścaldās’s identity as a Dādū-panthī shines through clearly elsewhere in the work: each of the seven chapters of the VS closes with a verse invoking Dādū Dayāl, the founder of the Panth. Indeed, these verses suggest that it was Dādū, rather than Rām, who played the role of *iṣṭa-deva* (the “chosen deity” to whom one has some special attachment) in Nīścaldās’s life. The first invocation of Dādū, at the end of chapter 1, reads:

[1.29] O Dādū Dīndayāl, the [very] image of the guru!  
Grant immediate liberation to those who read this first chapter.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> VS p. 1.

<sup>69</sup> As Sālemahammad explains, Nīścaldās did not write a commentary for his *maṅgalācaraṇa* verses, but he did provide oral commentary on them when teaching the VS. Śrī Trilok-rām, who had studied with Nīścaldās, passed this commentary on to Pītāmbār, who in turn included it with his gloss (*tippan*) on the VS. See Nīścaldās 2003, intro., p. 9, n. 1.

<sup>70</sup> VS, *maṅgala kī ṭīkā*, p. 5.

<sup>71</sup> VS, *maṅgala kī ṭīkā*, p. 5. —The commentary also mentions a second possible interpretation (introduced by *athavā*, “Or”) of the verse according to which Rām is understood as different from the Supreme Brahman. Following this interpretation, the verse would be translated: “That [Supreme Brahman] whom the virtuous, worshipping Rām without attachment, desire to know: he is my self. To whom should I bow down?”

<sup>72</sup> VS p. 19.

Here Niścaldās has elevated Dādū beyond the level of the historical founder of a *sampradāy*; Dādū is identified with the living guru, who has the power to grant liberation to disciples here and now.<sup>73</sup> The verse at the end of chapter 2 goes even further, identifying Dādū with the Supreme Self:

[2.15] Dādū Dīndayāl, [who is] being, bliss, and light supreme,  
To whom the mind cannot attain: that very one is Niścaldās.<sup>74</sup>

Here Dādū is explicitly identified with Brahman of the Upanishads, who is *sac-cid-ānanda* (being-consciousness-bliss), “from whom mind and speech turn away.”<sup>75</sup> As in the benedictory verse which concluded, “To whom should I bow down,” Niścaldās again affirms his own ultimate identity with Brahman, but in a surprisingly personalized context: literally, he identifies himself with Dādū.<sup>76</sup>

In chapter 3 of the VS, Niścaldās describes the qualities of a guru at length. In a climactic and oft-quoted line, Niścaldās identifies the guru with Brahman:

[3.10] He who knows Brahman has the nature of Brahman; his words are Veda.  
Whether in the vernacular or in Sanskrit, they cut through the delusion of difference.<sup>77</sup>

This verse can be read as having a double meaning. On the one hand, Niścaldās’s reference to the vernacular is connected to an earlier discussion explaining the usefulness of the VS for those who cannot read Sanskrit. But the verse can also plausibly be read as an allusion to the

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<sup>73</sup> For a study of the role of the *sad-guru* in *sant* tradition, see Gold 1994. See also the *Dakṣiṇā-mūrti-stotra* (attrib. Śaṅkara) for a well-known Vedāntic vision of the guru as a form of God.

<sup>74</sup> VS p. 55.

<sup>75</sup> Cf. *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* 2.4 (Olivelle 1998, pp. 302-3).

<sup>76</sup> It is not at all uncommon for Advaita Vedāntins to identify themselves not just with formless Brahman but also with particular forms of God, as in the well-known mantra *Śivo ’ham* (I am Śiva). Insofar as the guru is held as equal to God, Niścaldās’s move to identify himself with Dādū is logical enough. Nonetheless, it remains unusual; I am not aware of any Vedāntic author who, for example, explicitly states his identity with Śaṅkarācārya.

<sup>77</sup> VS p. 59.

works of Dādū Dayāl, which are known as *Dādū-vāṇī* (“the words of Dādū”) and which are the main scripture within the Dādū Panth. Read in this light, the verse implies: “Dādū is Brahman, his *Vāṇī* (= *bānī*) is the Veda.”<sup>78</sup>

Elsewhere in chapter 3, Nīscaldās writes that students should love their guru as if he were the Lord himself; he also says the guru should be imagined mentally as if he were Hari, Hara, Brahmā, Gaṅgā, and Ravi.<sup>79</sup> The chapter concludes with the verse:

[3.23] Dādū, our constant helper, the essence of all, is himself the one  
Whom [students] serve with devoted minds, offering body, mind, wealth, and speech.<sup>80</sup>

This verse helps to explain an otherwise surprising absence: nowhere in his works does Nīscaldās pay homage to, or even acknowledge, his actual gurus. Nīscaldās seems to have viewed Dādū as his true guru, even if this relationship was mediated through other human teachers.<sup>81</sup>

The concluding verses from the remaining chapters are similar, and in order to avoid repetition—or better, *gurutva* (*śleṣa* intended)—I will summarize rather than quote: the verse from chapter 4 declares the identity of self, Brahman, and the “original form of Dādū” (in a nicely alliterative phrase: *dādū-ādū-rūpa*); chapter 5 appeals to Dādū once again as a granter of liberation (“O Dādū, cause those who read this chapter to attain to true vision!”); and chapter 6

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<sup>78</sup> According to Nārāyaṇdās (vol. 2, pp. 837-8), Nīscaldās’s personal practice included recitation of *Dādū-vāṇī* first thing every morning, which, if true, would support the secondary meaning just suggested.

<sup>79</sup> VS 3.14-5, pp. 61-2.

<sup>80</sup> VS p. 63.

<sup>81</sup> A distinction is commonly made between two kinds of guru: (1) the *dīkṣā-guru*, through whom one receives initiation (*dīkṣā*) (in the case of renunciates, the *dīkṣā-guru* is also known as a *sannyās-guru*) and (2) the *vidyā-guru*, through whom one receives knowledge (*vidyā*); cf. Dādū 1994, p. 26. Nīscaldās seems to have had a *dīkṣā-guru* in the person of Amardās (or Alakhrām) as well as several *vidyā-gurus* (notably Kākārāma) when he studied in Banaras, but none of them is mentioned in his works, as Dādū notes (pp. 41-2). For his part, Sūrat-rām Dādū argues (following Nārāyaṇdās) that Nīscaldās revered Dādū as his guru because he had achieved realization through reading *Dādū-vāṇī*.

declares that upon liberation, the seeker “is himself unveiled as Dādū Dayāl.”<sup>82</sup> Chapter 7 brings *The Ocean of Inquiry* to a close with not just one but two verses invoking Dādū as Brahman and summarizing the ideas of the preceding chapter:

[7.116] The one with whom the sage, in liberation at death, is non-different  
Is Dādū, whose original form is spoken of in the Vedas.

[7.117] Names and form are inconstant, [but the] incomparable One is pervasive.  
The implied referent of the word Dādū is being, consciousness, bliss.<sup>83</sup>

The last two lines are particularly illuminating: the term “implied referent” (*lacchya*, Skt. *lakṣya*) is discussed at length in chapter 6 of the VS, where Nīscaldās explains that the literal meaning of the word *tat* (in *tat tvam asi*, “You are that”) is Īśvara, while its implied referent is Brahman. In this context, Dādū clearly stands in the place of Īśvara. Like “Īśvara,” the word “Dādū” has a double referent: literally it refers to the historical guru and founder of the Dādū Panth, but its implied referent—the essence to which the word points, when separated from the accidents of name and form which have been superimposed on it—is none other than Brahman, the sole reality.

The passages considered above suggest two conclusions. First, Nīscaldās felt an exceptionally close relationship to Dādū, whom he seems to have viewed as both his guru and his *iṣṭa-deva*. Second, his veneration for this Hindi *sant* and *bhakti* poet is expressed in the language of the Upanishads and situated in the doctrinal context of classical Advaita Vedānta. To return to the comparison of Sundardās and Nīscaldās: both belonged to the Dādū Panth, and both attempted to synthesize a vernacular devotional tradition with the Sanskrit tradition of Advaita Vedānta. But while Sundardās was—schematically speaking—at heart a Dādū-panthī

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<sup>82</sup> VS 4.120, p. 120; VS 5.170, p. 183; VS 6B.60, p. 283.

<sup>83</sup> VS p. 328.

with a reverence for Vedānta, Niścaldās was essentially a Vedāntin with a reverence for Dādū; that, at least, is the picture his works suggest.

### *Early education*

Nārāyaṇdās reports that Niścaldās began his studies while in Delhi, with Amardās, first learning to read Devanāgarī, then moving on to study Dādū's *Vāṇī*, Sundardās's *Savaiyā*, and *stotras* such as Sundardās's *aṣṭakas*, which are recited liturgically within Dādū Panth.<sup>84</sup> If this account is correct, even in rough outline, it would indicate that Niścaldās's earliest intellectual formation was in the traditions of the Panth; he would also no doubt have been involved in the ritual life of the *akhārā* where he was staying.

Niścaldās was by all accounts a gifted student with an excellent memory. Recognizing his disciple's potential, Amardās sent Niścaldās to a Sanskrit school in Jālandhar (in Punjab), according to Nārāyaṇdās's account.<sup>85</sup> According to Singh, Niścaldās had met another Dādū-panthī *sādhu* while in Delhi, Swami Svarūpānand, who hailed from Niścaldās's home village of Dhanāṇā. The two received Amardās's blessing to leave Delhi and travel throughout the Punjab in search of learning. Singh says they travelled to Jālandhar, Lahore, Amritsar, and other cities.<sup>86</sup> According to this account, the two were not satisfied with the teachers they found on their travels and resolved to journey to Banaras, which was famed for the learning of its pandits.<sup>87</sup> In Nārāyaṇdās's version, Niścaldās finished his initial Sanskrit studies in Jālandhar,

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<sup>84</sup> Vol. 2, p. 834. —On the liturgical use of the Sundardās's *aṣṭakas*, see Thiel-Horstmann 1983, p. 15; cf. Dādū 1994, p. 41.

<sup>85</sup> Vol. 2, p. 834.

<sup>86</sup> Singh 1981, p. 5.

<sup>87</sup> Singh 1981, p. 5: "Dillī kī vātāvaraṇ saṃskṛt śikṣā ke liye adhik anukūl na samajhkar ... ." Note that this line is quite similar to Nārāyaṇdās's "Dehlī meṃ adhik vidyā prāpt hone ko suvidhā na dekhkar ..." (p. 835). Both seem to be derived from Tripāṭhī (1914, p. 7): "dillī meṃ adhik vidyābhyās kī anukūlatā na hone se."

then received Amardās's blessing to head to Banaras (with Svarūpānand) for further study.<sup>88</sup> Either way, all sources record that Nīscaldās went to Banaras for study, and it seems likely that he would have sought a blessing (as well as funding) from his *sannyās-guru* first.

All sources are agreed that Nīscaldās travelled from the Delhi region to Banaras when he was still young. The usual age given is 14.<sup>89</sup> Sūrat-rām Dādū has questioned this tradition, however, noting that even a highly gifted student would have taken several years to master his Hindi studies in Delhi, to say nothing of preliminary Sanskrit studies.<sup>90</sup> It is impossible to know for certain; Dādū's objection is in any case a good reminder that the details of the oral sources should never be taken for granted, even when there is widespread agreement.

#### *Banaras, city of pandits*

Banaras was a natural destination for a gifted pupil in search of traditional learning. During the period of Mughal rule, students and pandits from all over India traveled to Banaras, some to study and work for a period of time, others to settle permanently. "The city was an unrivalled centre for Sanskrit education," writes Rosalind O'Hanlon, "a place where the learned could make their reputations with well-connected sponsors and the pious could meet wealthy patrons."<sup>91</sup> Beginning in the eighteenth century, O'Hanlon notes, Banaras's unrivalled status declined somewhat with the emergence of highly educated and well-funded circles of

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<sup>88</sup> Vol. 2, p. 834-5. —Several sources (as early as Tripāṭhī) say that Nīscaldās traveled to Banaras in the company of his friend and fellow Dādū-panthī, Swami Svarūpānand, but no subsequent mention of him is made.

<sup>89</sup> His age is given as 14 in the earliest sources, Sālemahammad (1874, p. 7) and Tripāṭhī (1914, p. 7), as well as in Nārāyaṇdās (vol. 2, p. 836). An age of 15-16 is mentioned by Kapil (2005, p. 22) and Upādhyāya (1994, pp. 182-3); their common source on this point appears to be Maṅgaldās, whose biography of Nīscaldās I do not have.

<sup>90</sup> 1994, p. 26.

<sup>91</sup> 2011, p. 254.



pandits in Maratha and Rajput courts<sup>92</sup>; the latter, indeed, played a significant role in Niścaldās's later life, as we shall see. But Banaras's reputation was nonetheless still considerable in Niścaldās's day, and one can imagine the excitement of a young man with Niścaldās's intellectual gifts arriving in Banaras to study. The city was home to teachers specializing in all the traditional branches of Sanskrit learning (the Vedas, *vyākaraṇa*, Vedānta, *mīmāṃsā*, *nyāya*, *dharma-sāstra*, etc.), as well as a destination for pilgrims and *sannyāsīs* from all over India.<sup>93</sup>

Niścaldās immersed himself deeply in his studies. This we know from his own testimony in two of the closing verses from the VS:

[7.111] [I] labored in Sāṃkhya and Nyāya, and studied grammar thoroughly.  
[I] read the works of Advaita, leaving not a single one [unread].

[7.112] With labor [I] plunged likewise into other difficult compositions  
In which the differences between schools [are set forth], [I], Niścaldās, knower of the Vedas.<sup>94</sup>

It is not surprising that Niścaldās's education in Banaras would have culminated in a study of Vedānta. As noted by Minkowski, Advaita Vedānta, had come to be something of the “establishment position” in Banaras, at least in the early modern period.<sup>95</sup> Many influential renunciates in the city were followers of Advaita Vedānta, as were many household scholars. Even pandits who specialized in subjects such as grammar, *Mīmāṃsā*, or *Nyāya*, were known to write works on Advaita Vedānta as well.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> 2011, p. 268.

<sup>93</sup> On Banaras as a pilgrimage center, see Eck 1993.

<sup>94</sup> VS p. 327.

<sup>95</sup> 2011, p. 217.

<sup>96</sup> Minkowski 2011.

Arriving in Banaras, Niścaldās is said to have stayed at the Dādū Maṭh on Assi Ghāṭ (which, though dilapidated, can still be seen there today).<sup>97</sup> This *maṭh* had been in existence since at least the seventeenth century, when Sundardās is said to have stayed there.<sup>98</sup> The various sectarian *maṭhs* in Banaras were important religious centers and especially popular destinations for wandering *sādhus* during the rainy season. As Sūrat-rām Dādū points out, while staying at the Dādū Maṭh, Niścaldās would have had contact with any number of scholars and *sādhus* from within the Panth who were passing through or staying in Banaras, in addition to his study with non-Dādū-panthī teachers in Banaras.<sup>99</sup>

According to some sources, Niścaldās initially went to study at the *āśram* of *sādhu* Viśuddhānand,<sup>100</sup> but this is hardly possible, since the latter does not seem to have been born until 1820.<sup>101</sup> All sources agree in any case that Niścaldās's main teacher in Banaras was the householder pandit Kākārāma, a Sārasvata Brahmin originally from Jammu, who had emigrated to Banaras with his family.<sup>102</sup> Kākārāma had been a brilliant student in his day—he is said to have learned the *Laghu-kaumudī* in just sixteen days—and he went on to earn prestige as a pandit: during his lifetime, the king of Nepal made him a land-grant, the deed of which still exists; and Kākārāma's family continued to receive a stipend from the king of Kashmir into the twentieth century. He is said to have taught all the *śāstras*, but Vedānta must have been a

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<sup>97</sup> Dādū 1994, p. 31.

<sup>98</sup> Dādū 1994, p. 31.

<sup>99</sup> Dādū 1994, p. 31.

<sup>100</sup> Tripāṭhī 1914, p. 7; Nārāyaṇdās (vol. 2, p. 835) once again seems to be borrowing directly from Tripāṭhī.

<sup>101</sup> Per the date given in Upādhyāya 1994, p. 817.

<sup>102</sup> Details on Kākārāma are drawn from Upādhyāya 1994, pp. 180-2.

specialty, since he is best known for a commentary he wrote on the Advaitic *Ātma-purāṇa* of Śaṅkarānanda (13<sup>th</sup> century).<sup>103</sup>

Much of the learning that took place in Banaras went on in the homes of householder-pandits like Kākārāma, especially before the rise of schools and universities.<sup>104</sup> The seventeenth-century French traveler François Bernier described the teaching that took place in these Banārsī households as follows:

The town contains no colleges or regular classes, as in our universities, but resembles rather the schools of the ancients; the masters being dispersed over different parts of the town in private houses, and principally in the gardens of the suburbs, which the rich merchants permit them to occupy. Some of these masters have four disciples, others six or seven, and the most eminent may have twelve or fifteen; but this is the largest number. It is usual for the pupils to remain ten or twelve years under their respective preceptors.<sup>105</sup>

Niścaldās likely studied under similar arrangements. He would probably have lived under the same roof as Kākārāma, studying under him with a small group of fellow pupils and performing household chores in return for the instruction he received.

Niścaldās seems to have excelled at his studies. There is a story that some of his fellow students, jealous of how quickly he memorized texts, once spoke ill of him to Kākārāma, complaining that although he knew many works by heart, his knowledge of them was only rote, and he lacked a true understanding of what he was memorizing. Kākārāma summoned Niścaldās and tested him, asking him difficult questions about the texts he had memorized, but Niścaldās's answers showed he had a thorough grasp of their meaning. Kākārāma is said to have been deeply impressed and to have proclaimed that Niścaldās must have been a scholar

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<sup>103</sup> According to Karl Potter's online *Bibliography of Indian Philosophies*, the *Ātmapurāṇa* has been published together with Kākārāma's commentary three times—an excellent avenue for future research.

<sup>104</sup> *Pāṭhaśālās* were established in Banaras under Rājput patronage beginning in the seventeenth century (O'Hanlon 2011, p. 257), and the first modern college—the Sanskrit College of Banaras—was founded by the British in 1791 (Dalmia 1996, p. 321); neither of these institutions played a role in Niścaldās's education, however.

<sup>105</sup> Qtd. in Eck 1983, p. 84; cf. O'Hanlon 2011, p. 258.

in a previous life.<sup>106</sup> A rather contradictory story reports that the elder disciples complained to their teacher not that Niścaldās was a rote learner but that he was an innovator, whose ideas departed from those of the texts they were studying; in this story, Kākārāma is said to have been secretly delighted when he heard the complaint, thinking he had found a worthy successor.<sup>107</sup> The details of these stories cannot be trusted, of course, but as it is clear from Niścaldās's works that he was indeed a formidable scholar, it is reasonable enough to assume that his abilities made an impression on the pandits of the city.

Two stories have been passed down about Niścaldās's interactions with the pandits of Banaras. The first is rather vague but captures a memory of Niścaldās's precociousness: he is said to have been seated with his teacher Kākārāma and fellow disciples at an assembly of scholars (*vidvad-maṇḍala*), where a difficult question was being discussed. Niścaldās asked permission to speak and then gave a well-reasoned answer in accordance with the *śāstras*. The pandits were duly impressed and all praised Kākārāma for training his student so well.<sup>108</sup> The other story recounts that Niścaldās was once present at a public lecture on Vedānta by a pandit named Tulsīdās.<sup>109</sup> The question Tulsīdās was discussing was the relationship of the two powers of *māyā*—projection (*vikṣepa*) and veiling (*āvaraṇa*)—to the Lord (*Īśvara*). Tulsīdās maintained that the Lord was not affected by the power of veiling but did fall under the power of *māyā* as projection. Niścaldās disagreed publicly, stating that the Lord was not affected by

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<sup>106</sup> Nārāyaṇdās, vol. 2, p. 835.

<sup>107</sup> Singh 1981, pp. 5-6.

<sup>108</sup> Tripāṭhī 1914, p. 8.

<sup>109</sup> Not to be confused with the author of the *Rām-carit-mānas*, whose dates are considerably earlier.

either power.<sup>110</sup> A debate ensued, which Niścaldās won; but the story concludes that Niścaldās chose not to attend his other lectures, not wishing to cause anyone embarrassment.<sup>111</sup>

According to Tripāṭhī, while in Banaras Niścaldās also studied Nyāya under Dāmodara Śāstrī.<sup>112</sup> Although it would by no means have been unusual for a student to study under multiple teachers, once again we are faced with a chronological impossibility: according to Upādhyāya, the well-known Dāmodara Śāstrī was not born until 1847, long after Niścaldās had left Banaras.<sup>113</sup> Caturvedī reports that while in Banaras Niścaldās also studied prosody with a certain Raspuñj-jī.<sup>114</sup> Caturvedī further claims that Niścaldās traveled to Nadiyā, in Bengal, to study Navya-Nyāya, but the claim seems doubtful at best.<sup>115</sup>

A remarkable story is sometimes told about Niścaldās concealing his caste in Banaras.<sup>116</sup> In those days the pandits of Banaras would accept only Brahmins as students. Niścaldās knew he would be turned away if he told his teachers he was a *jāṭ*, so instead he presented himself as a Brahmin. Only at the end of his time in Banaras (some 20-25 years later, depending on the

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<sup>110</sup> The subject of the two powers of *māyā* and their relationship to Īśvara are treated at length in VS ch. 4.

<sup>111</sup> Sālemahammad 1874, pp. 8-9.

<sup>112</sup> 1914, p. 8.

<sup>113</sup> 1994, p. 278.

<sup>114</sup> 1964/5, p. 515. (The first edition gives the name as Daspuñj.)

<sup>115</sup> Caturvedī (1964/5, p. 515) says it is “well known” (*prasiddh*) that Niścaldās went to Nadiyā, but there are several reasons to doubt the claim: (1) Other details of Caturvedī’s biography of Niścaldās—such as the claim that Niścaldās was married (twice!)—are known to be unreliable. (2) The story of Niścaldās traveling to Bengal is not mentioned by Sālemahammad (author of the earliest account) or by Nārāyaṇdās (whose account is by far the most thorough). (3) By the early nineteenth century there would have been no need to travel to Nadiyā to study Navya-Nyāya, since there were already many experts in it in Banaras. (4) Although Niścaldās’s works show that he is indeed knowledgeable in Navya-Nyāya, he consistently approaches it through the lens of late Vedāntic authors and does not seem nearly as steeped in its approaches as was, for example, Madhusūdana Sarasvatī. —Nadiyā was of course the traditional center of Navya-Nyāya, and it is possible that it was simply Niścaldās’s command of Nyāya as well as Vedānta that suggested to someone the story that he must have traveled there to study.

<sup>116</sup> See, e.g., Caturvedī 1964/5, pp. 514-5, and Nārāyaṇdās, vol. 2, pp. 836-7. It is worth noting that neither of my two earliest sources (Sālemahammad 1874, Tripāṭhī 1914) records this story.

source) did the truth come out. The story goes that Pandit Kākārāma, who was a householder, had a daughter whom he wished Niścaldās to marry.<sup>117</sup> Niścaldās tried to refuse, but his teacher was insistent, and in the end, Niścaldās had no choice—so the story goes—but to tell his teacher the truth: first, that he was actually a *jāṭ* and so could not marry a Brahmin’s daughter; and second, that he was in fact a renunciate, forbidden to marry in the first place. This story rings a little odd, however. Although it is quite possible that Niścaldās concealed his caste, it seems less likely that he could have arrived as a member of the Dādū Panth and stayed at the Dādū Maṭh for a time without word of his identity as a Dādū-panthī renunciate spreading.

At any rate, the story continues: Kākārāma (or another pandit, or the entire *vidvat-maṇḍala*, depending on the version of the story) was enraged at Niścaldās’s deception and pronounced a curse on him. Here the story has been significantly transformed in its multiple tellings: the most common version says that Niścaldās was cursed to suffer a fever of either one or two hours every day. Another version says he was additionally cursed never to have disciples who would be capable of carrying on his intellectual lineage. Yet another version of the story—an amusing example of how details can be garbled in the re-telling, as in a game of telephone—says that Niścaldās was cursed to undergo two marriages!<sup>118</sup>

The story of the curse is further elaborated on in Nārāyaṇdās’s life of Niścaldās, with a sectarian elaboration. It is said there that Niścaldās did indeed suffer from a fever every day. One day, after his fame as a teacher had spread, he was visited by a holy man who asked him,

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<sup>117</sup> Nārāyaṇdās, vol. 2, p. 836, where Kākārāma is said to have made this proposal after Niścaldās approached him asking permission to leave in order to return home. In Caturvedī’s telling, it is not Kākārāma but an unidentified Brahmin. —See O’Hanlon 2011 for a discussion of the importance of marriage strategies for pandit households in Banaras.

<sup>118</sup> Caturvedī 1964/5, p. 515. As Dādū (1994, p. 35) writes: “This version of the story is absurd. Why would Niścaldās obey? And the pandits would have to have been mentally unstable to pronounce such a curse.”

“Why do you not take medicine for this fever?” Niścaldās told him that medicine was useless for treating it, since the fever was the result of a pandit’s curse. The *sādhū* considered this for a while, then advised Niścaldās to recite *Dādū-vāṇī* every day. Niścaldās (“who had great faith in *Dādū-vāṇī*,” Nārāyaṇdās tells us) began the very next day, reciting it first thing in the morning, after his ablutions. Within a few days, the story concludes, the fever went away.<sup>119</sup>

### *Life in Kihaḍaulī*

After years of study in Banaras, Niścaldās had become a pandit in his own right, and he decided to return to Delhi.<sup>120</sup> He eventually settled in a small village named Kihaḍaulī (modern Kiḍolī), eighteen *koś* (roughly thirty-six miles) to the west of Delhi. His *āśram* there was a branch of the Dādū-panthī headquarters in Delhi.<sup>121</sup> Nārāyaṇdās reports that Amardās had in fact been the superintendent of this Kihaḍaulī branch, which would mean that it existed already before the time of Niścaldās.<sup>122</sup> Kapil tells a different story, however, reporting that by the time Niścaldās returned to Delhi, management of the *sthān* had passed on to a new *mahant*. This new superintendent was jealous of Niścaldās and refused to let him stay in Delhi, fearing that his disciples would leave him for Niścaldās. Looking for a peaceful place to practice Vedānta, Niścaldās headed to the nearby village of Kihaḍaulī. Later, Kapil reports, the *mahant* in Delhi

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<sup>119</sup> Nārāyaṇdās, vol. 2, pp. 837-8.

<sup>120</sup> Nārāyaṇdās (vol. 2, p. X) says that Niścaldās was 40 years old when he returned from Banaras. Dvārikādās’s chronology (which, again, follows Maṅgaldās) has Niścaldās returning to Delhi in 1826, which would put him at around 35.

<sup>121</sup> That Niścaldās’s *āśram* was indeed officially connected with the Dādū Panth is confirmed by the letter written by his disciples shortly after Niścaldās’s death (see below); there the *āśram* is referred to as a *dādū-dvārā*.

<sup>122</sup> Vol. 2, p. 835.

was won over by Niścaldās's sanctity and granted twenty *bīghās* of land to establish an *āśram* in Kihaḍaulī.<sup>123</sup>

To the end of his life, Niścaldās spent his days in Kihaḍaulī in a simple hut, hardly tall enough to stand up in.<sup>124</sup> It is said that even after receiving royal patronage late in life, Niścaldās continued to lead the simple life of a renunciate, dressing simply and refusing to live in a proper house. Nārāyaṇdās goes so far as to describe Niścaldās's physical appearance, with a charming combination of hagiographical praise and down-to-earth description:

He was neither fat nor thin, and he had a dark (*śyām*) complexion; some of his teeth were missing, and he always wore a thoughtful expression. When seated, he seemed like a great sage of old. Seekers of liberation found joy simply in beholding him bodily.<sup>125</sup>

Nārāyaṇdās also offers a description of Niścaldās's daily routine in Kihaḍaulī.<sup>126</sup> While the details are of course questionable, the account at least provides a rough sense of the kinds of activities that might have filled the days of a Vedāntin and Dādū-panthī renunciate. According to Nārāyaṇdās, then, Niścaldās's day began with a morning bath followed by recitation of *Dādū-vānī*. Then he would teach his disciples from one of the three foundational texts of Advaita Vedānta (the *prasthāna-trayī*): the Upanishads, the *Brahma-sūtras*, and the *Bhagavad-gītā*. Next, for disciples who were capable, as well as for visiting scholars, he would teach more advanced works of Vedānta. At midday he would rest, and in the afternoon and evening there would be *satsaṅg* and further teaching, as well as discussions of the *śāstras*. Sālemahammad includes an interesting detail about Niścaldās's schedule, claiming that he would teach Nyāya and other

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<sup>123</sup> 2005, p. 28.

<sup>124</sup> His hut was still standing in Kihaḍaulī as late as 1928, when a young Nārāyaṇdās visited the *āśram*, then in the hands of a disciple of one of Niścaldās's disciples (Nārāyaṇdās, vol. 2, p. 847).

<sup>125</sup> Vol. 2, p. 850.

<sup>126</sup> Vol. 2, pp. 846-7.



non-Vedāntic subjects only in the afternoon; mornings, he once told a student, should be reserved for knowledge of the self.<sup>127</sup>

There is much we do not know about Niścaldās's time in Kīhaḍaulī. First, there is the question of how he supported himself and his disciples. It is worth noting that renunciates within the Dādū Panth are not forbidden from being involved in business. Singh reports having inspected Niścaldās's library and finding there an account book and a letter which, he says, demonstrate that Niścaldās engaged in business transactions as far as the city of Bhivānī.<sup>128</sup> Unfortunately, he gives no further details, and it is possible that these transactions were not with merchants but rather with another branch of the Dādū Panth.<sup>129</sup>

Many sources report that Niścaldās practiced Ayurveda, and there is strong circumstantial evidence supporting this possibility. First, Niścaldās himself mentions Ayurveda in the VS, as evidence of the usefulness of works written in languages other than Sanskrit: "Just as one can have full knowledge of the things spoken about in Ayurveda—diseases, diagnoses, and medicines—from vernacular and Persian works, so too one can know Brahman, the self of all, from works in other languages."<sup>130</sup> It is also true that the practice of Ayurveda was (and still is) a common profession for members of the Dādū Panth. Some sources reports that it was Niścaldās's bout with fever (allegedly brought on by the curse of his teacher in Banaras) that first led him to study Ayurveda. There is also a widespread rumor that Niścaldās himself composed a work on Ayurveda, though no such work seems to have survived. Singh

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<sup>127</sup> 1874, pp. 7-8. Dādū (1994, p. 36, note) remarks that he himself has seen Dādū-panthī scholars upholding a similar rule, refusing to teach anything but *Dādū-vāṇī* in the morning.

<sup>128</sup> 1981, p. 15.

<sup>129</sup> On the presence of the Dādū Panth in Bhivānī, see Nārāyaṇdās.

<sup>130</sup> VS 3.10 comm., p. 59.

reports that he did find several hand-written pages on Ayurveda in Niścaldās's library in Kihaḍaulī.<sup>131</sup> His disciples are also said to have preserved the scales that Niścaldās used to weigh herbs, as well as a tobacco hookah.<sup>132</sup> It is quite possible, then, that Niścaldās supported himself at least in part through the practice of Ayurveda.

Moving from the mundane to the spiritual, another question to consider is whether Niścaldās's discussions of the path to liberation were grounded in his own experience. Already in Sālemahammad's account of Niścaldās, we encounter the argument that the depth of knowledge displayed in the VS is itself evidence that Niścaldās was a sage.<sup>133</sup> There is one verse in the VS where Niścaldās appears to allude to his own liberation:

[4.120] In the thought, "I am Brahman," the original form of Dādū  
Appears unveiled; this I have recognized.<sup>134</sup>

At first reading, this verse is not so different from the other concluding verses to each chapter, or from the benedictory verses described above, in which Niścaldās identifies himself with the supreme self. Such identifications are stock in trade for Advaita Vedānta, and a follower of the school might well write "I am Brahman" without meaning to claim realization for himself. But "I am Brahman" is quite different from the claim "I have realized Brahman," which seems to be precisely what Niścaldās is saying, and to make such a claim in writing is unusual even among Advaita Vedāntins. Certainly by the end of his life, Niścaldās's closest disciples regarded him as

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<sup>131</sup> Singh 1981, p. 29.

<sup>132</sup> Kapil 2005, p. 31. This evidence would prove decisive except for the possibility that the scales and the pages on Ayurveda might not have belonged to Niścaldās but to one of his successors; it seems, for example, that Manīrām, the holder of Niścaldās's lineage at Kihaḍaulī two generations later, was a practicing physician (Nārāyaṇḍās, vol. 2, p. 856) and author of two works on Ayurveda (Kapil 2005, p. 31). Even so, the weight of the evidence strongly favors the report that Niścaldās himself was a practitioner. —Reports are mixed as to whether Niścaldās himself smoked, or whether the hookah was used medicinally with patients.

<sup>133</sup> 1874, p. 7.

<sup>134</sup> VS p. 120.

a sage; for evidence of this, see the letter written by two of his disciples shortly after Niścaldās's death, discussed below. Sālemahammad's informants likewise remembered Niścaldās not only for his learning but also for his saintly character.

As for Nārāyaṇdās, whether or not all the stories he includes are true, they have an important double function: first, they represent individual and communal memories of Niścaldās as they have been passed down within the Dādū Panth; second, insofar as his life of Niścaldās has become the standard reference among Dādū-panthīs, they continue to shape these memories. In this connection, it is worth mentioning two miracles attributed to Niścaldās, though as far as I know, these stories do not feature in any other source. The first concerns a simple-minded soul who once heard Niścaldās teaching from the VS. Not understanding the Vedāntic teachings in it, he was puzzled when Niścaldās recited a verse equating himself with Dādū. "But you don't look anything like Dādū!" the man protested. Niścaldās thought to himself: "This man has no aptitude for inquiry; still, he is full of faith. Rather than explain the point to him with *śāstras*, it would be better for me to reveal things to him directly." Niścaldās then told the man to look again, and before his eyes he manifested himself in the form of Dādū Dayāl.<sup>135</sup>

The second miracle recorded by Nārāyaṇdās has Niścaldās meeting a woman with tuberculosis, who is said to have seized Niścaldās's feet and wept, saying, "Mahārāj, this disease is going to kill me, and I can't bear the pain!" Niścaldās is said to have responded: "How can disease touch you? You are of the nature of Brahman. Continually think, 'I am the pure, changeless Brahman': this is the best medicine for getting rid of disease. Abandon all other remedies." Now the woman had tried many remedies to no avail, Nārāyaṇdās says. But she

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<sup>135</sup> Nārāyaṇdās, vol. 2, p. 844.

took Niścaldās's advice, and in just a little while—so the story concludes—the tuberculosis disappeared altogether.<sup>136</sup>

A final question concerning Niścaldās's life following his return from Banaras is whether he taught only in Kihaḍaulī, or whether he might have spent time traveling and teaching elsewhere, too. Tripāṭhī has Niścaldās wandering and teaching for a period after his studies in Banaras, before settling down in Kihaḍaulī.<sup>137</sup> Dvārikādās, who provides a time-table of major events in the life of Niścaldās, has the following entry for the year 1827: "Residence in Kihaḍaulī and wandering and teaching Vedānta in *tīrths* such as Haridwar (until 1842)."<sup>138</sup> Dvārikādās's chronology is not reliable, but it is worth considering the possibility that Niścaldās might have spent time in pilgrimage centers such as Haridwar, where *sādhus* of many different sects gathered, and where he might well have begun to acquire a reputation for himself outside of the Dādū Panth.<sup>139</sup> Sālemahammad's account likewise implies that Niścaldās taught in many places, though it does not mention them by name: "Wherever Niścaldās wandered (*pr̥thvī par jahām vicarate the*), he always taught Vedānta. Many times he drew from this work [i.e. the VS] and from the *Vṛtti-prabhākar*. Wherever he taught, an assembly of many *sādhus* would listen with delight to his enthralling lectures."<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Nārāyaṇdās, vol. 2, p. 845.

<sup>137</sup> 1914, p. 9. Note that Tripāṭhī also reports (contrary to the story about the curse) that Niścaldās received the blessing of Kākārāma before departing.

<sup>138</sup> 1989, p. 12.

<sup>139</sup> There is internal evidence from chapter 6 of the VS that Niścaldās had been to Haridwar. In making an argument that the things we see in dreams are not real, Niścaldās writes: "A person might go to sleep at night and see, in Haridwar, the [Haridwarpuri] temple on the east [bank] of the Ganges, bathed in the midday sun, and the Nila Parvat on the west. [But] [there should] not be midday sun at night. [And] Haridwarpuri is not east of the Ganges, and the Nila Parvat is not west of the Ganges. Hence, too, it is not possible that one sees real objects in dreams." (VS 6A.5 comm., p. 188).

<sup>140</sup> Sālemahammad 1874, p. 8. —If Niścaldās were teaching from the VP, however, it would have been much later than the period Dvārikādās gives in his chronology, since the VP was commissioned by the Mahārāj of Bundi, whom he did not meet until the last decade of his life.

Sūrat-rām Dādū points out that at the very least, Niścaldās would have traveled to attend some of the *melās* (festivals) of the Dādū Panth. During these *melās*, which are celebrated on the death anniversaries of Dādū and other *sants*, food is prepared in large quantities and given away to *sādhūs*; these *melās* offer a chance for members of the community to come together, share meals, and hear religious discourses.<sup>141</sup> Nārāyaṇdās seems to suggest that Niścaldās's name is found in *melā* attendance records of *saṃvat* 1890-1891 (ca. A.D. 1833-5).<sup>142</sup> If this is true, it would represent the earliest historical record of Niścaldās.<sup>143</sup>

#### *Niścaldās as a teacher*

Niścaldās's main work throughout his life was teaching. Even his writings were a natural extension of this work: at least some of them were composed at the request of others, their aim was pedagogical, and Niścaldās used them as the basis of his own daily lectures. I will describe Niścaldās's pedagogy in greater detail in chapter 6. For now, let me quote Sūrat-rām Dādū, who offers a portrait of Niścaldās as a teacher that accords well with his pedagogical style as it emerges in the VS: "He was unparalleled as an explainer, and he would show the concordance of different views. Through [appeals to] experience, reasoning, and *śāstra*, he would help his hearers to realize for themselves the falseness of incorrect positions."<sup>144</sup> Niścaldās is said to have taught primarily in Hindi, but sometimes he would also use Sanskrit

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<sup>141</sup> The practice of giving food away was performed at Niścaldās's own death; see the letter of his disciples, discussed below. This kind of *melā* remains an important communal ritual in the Dādū Panth to this day; see Hastings 2002.

<sup>142</sup> Vol. 2, p. 839.

<sup>143</sup> Unfortunately, Nārāyaṇdās does not specify exactly when or where the *melās* were held, or how he came by this information.

<sup>144</sup> 1994, pp. 49.

works as the basis of his lectures, providing a paraphrase and oral commentary in Hindi. He is also said to have taught and conversed in Sanskrit with visiting pandits.<sup>145</sup>

As Niścaldās's fame as a teacher spread, *sādhus* came to study with him, for shorter or longer periods of time. Caturvedī refers to a *pāṭhaśāla* in Kihaḍaulī,<sup>146</sup> but the actual situation seems to have been less formal; according to Dādū, Niścaldās simply taught whoever came, for however long they wished to stay. Dādū speculates that at any given time there were perhaps no more than 8-10 *sādhus* staying with Niścaldās, since the facilities at the Kihaḍaulī *āśram* (basically a few small huts) were relatively modest.<sup>147</sup> We know from the letter composed by Niścaldās's disciples that at the time of his death there were indeed around that number: 2-3 were disciples proper, while the other 5-7 are described in the letter as “unaffiliated” or “independent” (*svatantra*)—which suggests that Niścaldās indeed taught both within and outside the Dādū Panth.

#### *The library at Kihaḍaulī*

Many sources report that Niścaldās had a lifelong love of learning and was always acquiring and reading new works. By the end of his life he had amassed an impressive collection of manuscripts. According to Sālemahammad, his library at Kihaḍaulī contained some 2,700,000

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<sup>145</sup> Dādū 1994, p. 39. —Nārāyaṇdās (vol. 2, p. 839-40) tells an amusing story about two pandits who were studying with Niścaldās, and who one day saw two shepherds with separate flocks of sheep which, in the course of crossing paths, had mixed together. The pandits asked the shepherds how they were able to tell the sheep apart, to which the shepherds replied: “What idiots! You can’t even tell the difference between one sheep and the next?”

<sup>146</sup> 1964/5, p. 516.

<sup>147</sup> 1994, p. 37.

*śloka*s.<sup>148</sup> Dādū, writing in 1994, confirms that when he visited Kihāḍaulī a large collection of manuscripts (by then disorganized and in poor condition) had still been preserved.<sup>149</sup>

Given the size of Niścaldās's library, it is likely that some of the visitors to Kihāḍaulī came not just to study with Niścaldās but to copy manuscripts (including his own works, of course). In the letter by Niścaldās's disciples, it is mentioned that at the time of Niścaldās's death there were several *sādhus* in Kihāḍaulī engaged in "writing books" (*kitnek sādhu pustak likhte haiṃ*), which as Dādū points out, likely means they were engaged in copying manuscripts from Niścaldās's library.<sup>150</sup>

### *Composing The Ocean of Inquiry*

It was at Kihāḍaulī that Niścaldās completed the VS, as he himself tells us in one of the final verses of the work:

[7.115] In a village eighteen *koś* to the west of Delhi,  
This [work] was completed. [The village] is named Kihāḍaulī.<sup>151</sup>

In another verse, Niścaldās explains his motive for writing:

[7.113] [I] composed this work in the vernacular without the slightest shame.  
There was only one motivation for this: compassion is the crown of *dharma*.<sup>152</sup>

Nārāyaṇḍās specifies that Niścaldās composed the VS at the request of *sādhus* who were studying with him. He names two in particular: Śālig-rām, who hailed from Ramgarh (in

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<sup>148</sup> 1874, p. 10.

<sup>149</sup> 1994, p. 48. He reports that the collection was nowhere near 27 lakh *śloka*s, though he notes that any number of manuscripts could have been given away or lost over the generations.

<sup>150</sup> 1994, p. 37.

<sup>151</sup> VS p. 328.

<sup>152</sup> VS p. 327.

Shekawati), and Dūlherām, the disciple of *mahātmā* Harirām of Gaurjī (also in Rajasthan); both were Dādū-panthīs.<sup>153</sup>

The VS is a long and ambitious work, an attempt to synthesize and summarize the teachings of dozens of Vedāntic texts composed over a thousand-year period. On this basis alone, Dādū speculates that it was perhaps not Niścaldās's first work, but rather a follow-up to his *Yukti-prakāś* (YP, discussed below), a shorter and simpler work which is difficult to date. The VS was in any case no doubt composed over a long period of time. We do not know when Niścaldās might have begun writing, but we do have a *terminus ante quem*: the earliest preserved manuscript is dated *saṃvat* 1905 (i.e. 1848/9 C.E.).<sup>154</sup> A *terminus post quem* can be roughly determined as follows: the earliest suggested date for Niścaldās's birth is 1791, and the earliest suggested age for his return from Banaras is 35; this would put him in Kihaḍaulī in 1826 at the earliest, and we know it was in Kihaḍaulī that the VS was completed. We can therefore estimate that the VS was completed between 1826 and 1849. There is good reason to favor, moreover, the later side of this range of dates, since: (a) 1849 is a solid *terminus ante quem*, while 1826 is simply the earliest possible year (if Niścaldās returned from Banaras at age 40, as Nārāyaṇdās reports, this would push the *terminus post quem* to 1831); (b) Niścaldās probably did not begin composing the VS immediately after his return from Banaras, and it likely took him several years to write; (d) the earliest manuscripts of the VS date from the period 1848-1851<sup>155</sup>; and (e) as discussed below, the Mahārāj of Bundi wrote to Niścaldās in

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<sup>153</sup> Nārāyaṇdās, vol. 2, p. 842.

<sup>154</sup> This ms. is the basis of Dvārikādās's 1989 edition.

<sup>155</sup> See Dādū 1994, p. 37.



1856/7: “Your fame has reached my ears,” which might well be connected to the circulation of early manuscripts of the VS.<sup>156</sup>

We know that once it was finished, Niścaldās used the VS for teaching; it seems he also used his students’ feedback to help him revise early drafts (a familiar enough process for anyone who has ever taught a class based on a book-in-progress.) The VS is composed of easily memorizable root verses, together with a prose commentary probably reflecting his oral teaching style.<sup>157</sup> While teaching, Niścaldās is said to have encouraged questions and objections, and his lectures often turned into discussions. Niścaldās would revise his text on the basis of these discussions, adding further explanations, correcting, or deleting passages as necessary.<sup>158</sup> The VS was therefore not a fixed work composed in scholarly solitude, but an evolving text he tested with his own students. As evidence of Niścaldās’s continual revisions, Dādū mentions one manuscript in his position, which dates from late in Niścaldās’s life, and which includes many marginal corrections and additions to the text.<sup>159</sup> This picture of Niścaldās revising the VS often, trying to make it as comprehensive, useful, and authoritative as possible, fits perfectly with what we know of the composition of his other major work, the VP; in the letter by Niścaldās’s disciples, it emerges that he was working on the VP up until his

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<sup>156</sup> Cf. Dādū (1994, p. 46), who suggests the VS was written over a 15 or 20 year period, from roughly *saṃvat* 1885 to *saṃvat* 1900, or 1828–1844 C.E. —Dvārikādās’s chronology assigns the composition of the VS to 1846 C.E.

<sup>157</sup> As Dādū points out, the commentary on the first five verses of the VS (which was written down by Pītāmbār, on the basis of Trilok-rām’s recollections, but not included in the original VS) suggests the close connection between Niścaldās’s written commentary and his oral teaching style.

<sup>158</sup> Dādū (1994, p. 14) tells a story of an instance where Niścaldās upheld his position against the objections of some visiting scholars. He was teaching from the VS, the story goes, and the scholars questioned him on the subject of *arthāpatti*, arguing that he had the *sampādyā* and the *sampādaka* reversed. He chose not to revise the VS on this point, however, and later, when he addresses the subject in the VP, he specifically refers to this passage in the VS and responds to the criticism of it.

<sup>159</sup> Dādū’s edition (1994) is the only one to take account of manuscript variants.

death, and the manuscript of the final chapter is said to have included “thousands” (*hazār hazār*, i.e. a great many) of additions, deletions, and variant readings.

#### *Other works by Niścaldās*

Niścaldās is best known for his three published works—the VS, the VP, and the YP (all in Hindi)—but he wrote at least two other works in Sanskrit, too. Here is a descriptive list of all works attributed to Niścaldās in various sources; the first five or six are verified works of Niścaldās, while the others are uncertain:

1. ***Vicār-sāgar***: See above for description and date of composition. The VS seems to have been in print since at least 1868.
2. ***Yukti-prakāś***: an authentic work of Niścaldās, now out of print and difficult to find.<sup>160</sup> It is a didactic work consisting of thirty-nine *yuktis* covering major topics in Vedānta. The work is written in simple Hindi, with supporting quotations in Sanskrit of *śruti* and *smṛti* to go with each *yukti*. Its date of composition is unknown, though it might represent an early work of Niścaldās.
3. ***Vṛtti-prabhākar***: a Hindi-language treatise on epistemology, composed between 1856 and 1863, at the request of Mahārāj Rām Singh of Bundi. Niścaldās was still working on the final chapter (ch. 8) at the time of his death.<sup>161</sup> It is referred to in the letter by Niścaldās’s disciples as the *Vṛtti-dīpikā*. The work offers a systematic and often highly technical treatment of Vedāntic epistemology.

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<sup>160</sup> Kapil mentions that “many scholars” have questioned the authenticity of the YP, but she does not name them; none of the sources I have consulted question Niścaldās’s authorship.

<sup>161</sup> Several sources (among others, Dvārikādās’s chronology and the introduction to the published Sanskrit translation of the VS) claim the VP was written before the VS, but this is clearly false, since (a) Niścaldās was working on the VP until the time of his death, and (b) the VP cites the VS by name in several places.

**4. Gloss on the *Īśā Upaniṣad*:** An unpublished Sanskrit work by Niścaldās, formerly kept at the library in Kihaḍaulī.<sup>162</sup> The work is referred to variously in sources as a *vyākhyā*, *bhāṣya*, or *vārttika*, but it is clear from the colophon (reproduced by Singh,<sup>163</sup> who saw the manuscript in Kihaḍaulī) that it is a *tippanī*, and that it was composed at the request of Rām Singh of Bundi:

*iti sṛīmanniścaldāsāhvayasādhuviracitā Bundiśekṣitodbhūteśāvāsyasya tippanī*

(Here ends the gloss on the *Īśāvāsyā Upaniṣad*, composed by the venerable *sādhū* Śrī Niścaldās at the request of the Lord of Bundi.)

**5. Gloss on the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*:** Details exactly as above, but with the following colophon:

*likhitā tippanī yasmai niścaldāsāhvayena sādhunā / bundiśenrpo rāmaḥ sarāmo bhavatātparaḥ //*

For whom [this] gloss has been written by the venerable *sādhū* Niścaldās, King Rām, the Lord of Bundi ...<sup>164</sup>

**6. Gloss (?) on the *Kena Upaniṣad*:** Nārāyaṇdās reports having seen three Sanskrit “*vārttikas*” in manuscript at the Śrī Dādū Mahāvidyālaya in Moti Dungri, on the *Īśāvāsyā*, the *Kaṭha*, and the *Kena Upaniṣads*, all attributed to Niścaldās.<sup>165</sup> Without seeing the manuscript, one cannot say for certain, but it is reasonable enough to assume that the “*vārttika*” on the *Kena Upaniṣad* was in fact a *tippanī* like the others.

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<sup>162</sup> As of January 2005 (per the report of Kapil), the Kihaḍaulī mss. were in the possession of a Dr. Jagadīśānand (or Jagadīś), an Ayurvedic physician in Delhi and the son of Rāmānand, the last *mahant* in Niścaldās’s lineage of disciples.

<sup>163</sup> 1981, p. 29.

<sup>164</sup> Singh 1981, p. 29. I have left the final portion (*sarāmo bhavatātparaḥ*) untranslated, since the meaning is unclear; the colophon is apparently corrupt, or has been reproduced incorrectly.

<sup>165</sup> Vol. 2, p. 850.

**7. Gloss on Nīlakaṇṭha's *Mahābhārata-ṭīkā*:** Nārāyaṇdās also mentions a report of selected Sanskrit glosses on Nīlakaṇṭha's *Mahābhārata* commentary; the glosses are said to have been added "wherever profound topics of Vedānta were treated."<sup>166</sup> No one has seen a manuscript confirming this report, but it is plausible; Niścaldās refers approvingly to Nīlakaṇṭha's *ṭīkā* in chapter 7 of the VS. Nārāyaṇdās says that a pandit who was opposed to Vedānta borrowed the work from Niścaldās's successor, Dayārām, then sabotaged the manuscript by gluing together the pages where Niścaldās had written his glosses, a situation discovered only later when another visitor came to see the work. Singh, too, mentions a "rumor" that certain Brahmins (here in the plural) heard of Niścaldās's glosses and glued the pages together out of jealousy, but Singh does not credit the story.<sup>167</sup>

**8. A work on Ayurveda:** As discussed above, several sources (beginning as early as Sālemahammad) report that Niścaldās wrote a work on Ayurveda, but no such work seems to have survived.

**9. A work on prosody:** According to Singh, Niścaldās is said to have composed a work on classical Hindi prosody. In this connection, he mentions a Hindi work titled *Vṛtt-vivaraṇ*, some torn pages of which were preserved in the library at Kihāḍaulī. The beginning and ending pages are missing, however, so the authorship is uncertain.<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Vol. 2, p. 850.

<sup>167</sup> He does note (p. 29) a manuscript of the *Bhīṣma-parva* of the *Mahābhārata* found in Niścaldās's library, copied in *saṃvat* 1911 (1854/5 C.E.), during Niścaldās's life, which is perhaps a sign of his continuing interest in the *Mahābhārata*. Kapil (p. 30) attributes to Niścaldās a gloss on the *Bhīṣma-parva*, but I have not listed this above, as it seems to be a misreading of Singh, who surely would have mentioned it had the ms. he viewed included glosses by Niścaldās.

<sup>168</sup> Singh 1981, pp. 29-30.

### *Guru to a king*

In 1856/7, a letter arrived for Niścaldās in Kihaḍaulī. The letter was written in Sanskrit, and it was signed by the Mahārāj of Bundi, Rām Singh (r. 1821 – 1889). Niścaldās’s fame had reached the king’s court, and he was eager to meet this great teacher of Vedānta. A copy of the letter was preserved by Niścaldās’s lineage of disciples at Kihaḍaulī, whence it came into the hands of Singh, who reproduces its text in his Hindi volume on Niścaldās.<sup>169</sup> The letter can be translated as follows:

॥ Śrī Hari ॥  
Śrī Pītāmbara

Greetings to the venerable Śrī Niścaldās, from the lord of lords and king of kings Śrī Rām Singh Varma, who pays reverence. May the Supreme Lord (*parameśvara*) increase day by day the blessings he has bestowed [on you] by his grace. Your fame in the Vedānta *śāstras* has reached my ears, and I am always eager for instruction in Vedānta. You should therefore come with all speed. [I hope] that you, though free of desires, will desire to undertake this good work; therefore I have written this letter.

[Composed] on the fourth [day] of the dark half of Caitra, *saṃvat* 1913. To the venerable Śrī Niścaldās, chief among *sādhus*.

Swami Nārāyaṇdās gives a different, highly embellished version of this letter, which he appears to have composed himself on the basis of second-hand reports about the letter. This version is worth translating here, too, both as a reminder of the problem of relying on oral reports, and also as a particularly striking example of hagiographical transformation. The Mahārāj’s letter opens with a salutation, Nārāyaṇdās reports, and then says:

Kindly grace me and my people by coming to the city of Bundi. Through your *darśan* and teaching, my court and I will be fulfilled (*ḥṛtārth*), and others seeking knowledge will also be satisfied. The pandit with whom I am sending this letter will bring you comfortably [to Bundi]; he will not let you be affected in the least by the hardships of the road. I have thoroughly arranged for all travel expenditures, and I am sending this pandit to you. I myself would have come to fetch you, but at this time, owing to royal duties, I am not able to come; still, through this letter, I place myself at your lotus feet. So please come quickly—do not delay! Why? Life

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<sup>169</sup> 1981, p. 10.

perishes in a moment. [Nothing] is certain; the body can perish at any time. In the next life, one might or might not meet with opportunities such as the present one affords. Therefore, accept my letter of entreaty and be sure to come. What more than this can I write to you? You are indeed all-knowing. Your servant, Rām Singh, Lord of Bundi.<sup>170</sup>

Nārāyaṇdās says that Niścaldās accepted the invitation and went to Bundi in *saṃvat* 1905 (1848/9 C.E.). Other sources report that Niścaldās received an initial invitation from the Mahārāj in *saṃvat* 1900 (1843/4 C.E.), and that although he accepted, unexplained circumstances kept him from going. He is then said to have received a second invitation in *saṃvat* 1913 and to have gone to Bundi shortly thereafter.<sup>171</sup> Only Sūrat-rām Dādū has noted that this version of events is clearly false; against all the uncertainty of oral reports, we have the evidence of the Sanskrit letter above, which establishes definitively that Niścaldās was not contacted by Rām Singh until *saṃvat* 1913. This date accords well, moreover, with what we know about the manuscript history of the VS; manuscripts start to appear beginning in *saṃvat* 1905, and it makes sense that it would have taken a few years from that time for Niścaldās's work to reach the court in Bundi.

Rām Singh's father, Bishan Singh, had been a close friend of James Tod, the celebrated author of *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan* (2 vols., 1829-1832). At his death, Bishan Singh had entrusted his son to the guardianship of Tod, who refers to Rām Singh in his annals as “a promising youth” and his own “nephew ... by courtesy and adoption.”<sup>172</sup> Rām Singh came to the throne in 1821, at the age of 11, and throughout his reign continued his father's policy of close alliance with the British government. As Pahalajrai notes, Rām Singh was given the titles “Knight Grand Commander of the Order of the Star of India” and “Advisor to the Queen”; he

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<sup>170</sup> Vol. 2, pp. 840-1.

<sup>171</sup> Curiously, even Singh (p. 10) gives this version of events, though it is clearly contradicted by the Sanskrit letter he provides.

<sup>172</sup> Tod, vol. 2, p. 465.

had coins minted with his name on one side and “Queen Victoria” on the other; and in 1858 he had his fort cannons fired on Indian soldiers involved in the 1857-8 uprisings against the British army, who had come to Bundi seeking refuge.<sup>173</sup> On the other hand, as Pahlajrai also notes, “he would bathe and have his clothes washed after meeting with Englishmen and Muslims.”<sup>174</sup> Rām Singh appears to have studied Sanskrit from a young age, and he became a great patron of Sanskrit learning; during his reign, Pahlajrai reports, some forty Sanskrit *pāṭhaśālās* were active in Bundi, and he also sponsored individual scholars.<sup>175</sup> According to Gahlot, “the city of Bundi was coming to be known as a second Kāśī.”<sup>176</sup>

Rām Singh’s patronage of Sanskrit learning was part of a wider movement among the Rajputs in the early modern period. As Horstmann notes (in a passage focusing on Mahārāj Jai Singh of Jaipur but applying to other Rajput courts as well): “In the process of asserting their regnal status, Savāi Jaisingh as much as other rulers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries reached out widely to the intellectual centres of India from which they recruited their experts. Knowledge gathering and digestion took place on a pan-Indian scale.”<sup>177</sup> The case of Nīscaldās shows that Rām Singh’s patronage extended to vernacular learning as well, or at the very least to Sanskrit learning as mediated through the vernacular.

According to Ranjīt Singh, when he first arrived in Bundi, Nīscaldās faced opposition from other pandits at Rām Singh’s court.<sup>178</sup> They are said to have found it unbearable that a

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<sup>173</sup> 2009, p. 56.

<sup>174</sup> 2009, pp. 56-7.

<sup>175</sup> 2009, p. 56.

<sup>176</sup> 1960, p. 100; qtd. in Pahlajrai 2009, p. 56, n. 18, though the translation is mine.

<sup>177</sup> Horstmann 2011, p. 198. O’Hanlon (2011) describes a similar process taking place at the Maratha courts during the same period.

<sup>178</sup> 1981, p. 10.

non-Brahmin should be appointed court pandit, and they were moreover opposed to the king studying Advaita Vedānta. This much is plausible. But Singh goes on to say that the king arranged a debate between Niścaldās and pandits who belonged to the “*cakrāṅkit*” *sampradāy*, and that it was the custom of the *sādhus* of this *sampradāy* to carry lit torches at all times, even during the day. I have not been able to discover any account of such a *sampradāy*; the story is perhaps a result of distorted hearsay. At any rate, Niścaldās is said to have won the debate, and the torch-carrying came to an end.<sup>179</sup> According to Sālemahammad, both the king and his queen came to view Niścaldās as their guru. He also reports that through Niścaldās’s instruction, the king himself earned the title of *vidvān* (scholar) and once took part in a *śāstrārth* (debate) with other pandits.<sup>180</sup>

We know that the Mahārāj of Bundi commissioned several works from Niścaldās; as described above, these included Sanskrit glosses on selected Upanishads. More importantly, it was Rām Singh who encouraged Niścaldās to compose, as a companion to the VS, another work in the vernacular, one which might allow readers without knowledge of Sanskrit to pursue advanced philosophical studies. The result was the VP, which is indeed a much more difficult, technical work than the VS.<sup>181</sup> Niścaldās might have begun composition of the work in Bundi, but again, we know that he was working on it in Kihāḍaulī up until the time of his death.

### *Travels in Rajasthan*

After his stay at Bundi, Niścaldās might have visited other cities in Rajasthan before returning to Kihāḍaulī. Nārāyaṇdās and Singh date this period of travel to *saṃvat* 1914, the year following

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<sup>179</sup> Singh 1981, pp. 10-1.

<sup>180</sup> 1874, p. 9-10.

<sup>181</sup> Sālemahammad reports that the VP proved valuable even to Sanskrit-trained pandits, who would study it in secret, refusing to admit in public that they had need of a vernacular work!



the invitation from Rām Singh. Rajasthan was the birthplace of the Dādū Panth and its administrative center, and it is entirely plausible that Niścaldās might have been spent time touring Dādū-panthī monasteries and pilgrimage sites in the region. Nārāyaṇdās specifically mentions visits to Udaipur, Jaipur, Narena (the main seat of the Panth, not far from Jaipur), and Ramgarh (in Shekhawati, north of Jaipur).<sup>182</sup>

Nārāyaṇdās and Singh both recount the following story: while Niścaldās was in Rajasthan, some members of the Dādū Panth in Ramgarh were troubled by a Brahmin named Maṅgaldatt, who is said to have reviled the Dādū Panth and continually tried to convince lay followers they should not be supporting its monks. Hearing that Niścaldās was nearby, the local members of the Panth sent word to him, requesting him to come and debate with Maṅgaldatt. Niścaldās agreed and set out for Ramgarh, but before he arrived, Maṅgaldatt caught word of his coming and is said to have fled in fear. The details of this story cannot be trusted,<sup>183</sup> but it is at least possible that it is based on a real event, the memory of which was passed down in the Panth. Dvārikādās's chronology also records that Niścaldās visited Ramgarh in 1857, saying simply that he engaged in a *śāstrārth* (debate) with Brahmin disputants.

### *Final years*

It is not known how long Niścaldās spent in Rajasthan, but we know that he eventually returned to Kihaḍaulī, where he spent the remainder of his days continuing to teach and to

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<sup>182</sup> See vol. 2, pp. 842-4.

<sup>183</sup> Nārāyaṇdās, with typical “embellishments,” has Maṅgaldatt think to himself as he flees from Niścaldās: “Dādū-vāṇī is in accord with the Vedānta, and the practices of the Dādū Panth are practices of the highest grade, belonging to the *sanātan-dharm*. It’s impossible to refute them. My mind has been swollen with passion, and I’ve been finding faults where there are none” (p. 843).

write. Not long before Niścaldās's death, the Mahārāj of Bundi desired to see him again. He sent another letter, also in Sanskrit, to Niścaldās in 1862.<sup>184</sup> In it the king mentions a letter he had received from Niścaldās (presumably in Sanskrit), though no copy of this letter seems to have survived.<sup>185</sup> In translation, the king's letter reads:

॥ Śrī Hari ॥  
Śrī Pītāmbara

Greetings to the venerable Śrī Niścaldās, from the lord of lords and king of kings Śrī Rām Singh Varma, who pays reverence. May the Supreme Lord (*parameśvara*) increase day by day the blessings he has bestowed [on you] by his grace. It gave me great joy to receive your letter, almost as if I were able to meet with you in person. Now I desire to see you again. To that end: I have heard that the greatest adepts (*adhikārī*) of the present time plan to come to the city of Agra, and so it is possible that I, too, will come to the festival (*sammelana*), either during the bright or the dark half of [the month of] Mārga-śrīṣa. You, too, should therefore come, [seated] among the wise—what could be better?

[Composed] on Ravi-vāsara (Sunday), the fourth [day] of the dark half of Kārtika, *saṃvat* 1919.

We know from a letter composed by two of Niścaldās's disciples that Niścaldās was also eager to see the king. He had been planning a trip to see him, but his wish remained unfulfilled: Niścaldās fell sick, and he knew that his death was at hand. The details are preserved in a Hindi-language letter (with strong Rajasthani inflections) which provides a trove of information about Niścaldās and his following at the time of his death.

The letter is addressed to Bakhtāvar Singh, who served as a minister at the court of Bundi. Word of Niścaldās's death had apparently reached the king, who inquired through his minister about the details of Niścaldās's death and funeral, as well as about the state of the

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<sup>184</sup> For the text of the letter, see Singh 1981, p. 11.

<sup>185</sup> It seems likely that there was continued, if intermittent contact between Rām Singh and Niścaldās since the time of their meeting in Bundi, either through correspondence or perhaps even in person; Dādū suggests that Rām Singh might have had a second residence in Delhi (p. 49).

*Vṛtti-prabhākar*. The response, a provisional translation of which is given below,<sup>186</sup> was composed by Dayārām, Nīscaldās's chief disciple and successor, and one other disciple, Nand-rām, about whom nothing else is known:

|| Śrī Rām ||

Health, prosperity, and long life to the worthy Bakhtāvar Singh-jī, servant of the king. Sādhus Dayārām [and] Nand-rām send greetings (lit., say “God is truth,” or *satya rām*, the standard salutation and valediction within the Dādū Panth) and news. May the Supreme Lord continue to grant happiness to you and the royal court.

Your letter written on the 13<sup>th</sup> [day] of the dark fortnight of Bhādvā (= Bhādom = Aug./Sept.) arrived [here] on the 6<sup>th</sup> [day] of the dark fortnight of Āsauj (= Asoj = Sept./Oct.).

In it you wrote [asking] what [the Master] suffered from; whether he went to the Ganges, and if so, whether or not his illness improved; who was present attending to him at the time of his passing; you asked for full details concerning his funeral; and [you asked] whether he had finished the new book he was working on. To answer your questions:

[The Master] was eagerly looking forward to the arrival of [the Mahārāj of] Bundi [at the festival in Agra?]. Several times he calculated an auspicious date [for his own departure to Agra?], settling on the 11<sup>th</sup> day in the bright fortnight of Bhāduvā (= Aug./Sept.). Meanwhile, as a result of the merits and sins of the virtuous and the wicked, the Lord wished to separate [the Master] from his [remaining] karma; hence, in accordance with the Lord's will, [the Master] contracted dysentery. After fifteen days he improved. Thereafter, he manifested [all] the signs of a sage living out his final days. For ten full days he took neither food nor drink, except for water from the Ganges. He [then] set out for the Ganges, arriving in Delhi at the sixth hour of the day. Drinking deeply from the water of the Ganges, he gave a sermon to all who were assembled there. [Then,] at an auspicious time of day, closing his eyes, he relinquished his body.

There were twenty [of us] in attendance on the Master (*mahārāj*). There were others, too, who were not engaged in carrying the palanquin but who arrived later; indeed, there were hundreds of people present at that time. From Kihaḍaulī the *sādhus* Dayārām and Muktirām were present, as well as two important landholders, and three men of the *nāī* caste, in addition to the palanquin-bearers. The others arrived a few hours later.

[The Master] departed for the *devaloka* on the 14<sup>th</sup> [day] of the dark fortnight of Sāvan (July/August), at an auspicious hour. Preparations continued for some time so that everything was in place for the funeral. Such was [the Master's] greatness that thousands of *sādhus*, brahmins, and merchants attended. ... [There follows a short itemized list of funeral expenses—elephants, horses, musicians, etc.] ... The cremation took place at the sixth hour on Nigambodh

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<sup>186</sup> The language of the letter is far from standard Hindi, and while I am confident of the general sense of the letter, some of the details remain unclear. *Caveat lector*.

Ghāṭ, as everyone, each in his own place, continually sang the praises of the Master's (*mahārāj*) birth and death. Such were the [funeral] expenses.

On the seventh day [after the Master's death], scholars of the six philosophies in Delhi were fed with *laḍḍūs* and other sweets, and Brahmins were given donations. This took place in Delhi. The following month, there was a meal at Kihaḍaulī, on the day of the new moon in the dark fortnight of Bhāḍavāṃ (=Aug./Sept.). [Scholars] of the six philosophies from three villages and *sādhus* from [as far as] forty *koś* (roughly eighty miles) in all directions were invited and a festival was held. This undertaking at Kihaḍaulī included the making of *jalebīs*, rice and sugar, and *pūrīs* with vegetables for the evening meal. Later there will be one more festival here. The arrangements for this festival have yet to be made. But the Master and the life he lived were far from common, which is why [the Mahārāj of] Bundi, who is preeminent among other kings, came to call him his guru. For this reason, it is not proper to have only this one meal at the *Dādū-dvārā*; for this reason, we intend to offer [more] food and drink in the month of Māh (= Māgh = Jan./Feb.). You asked for food and drink to be sent to the place where the Master (*mahārāj*) ended his life. Why the great feast at the *Dādū-dvārā* [in Kihaḍaulī]? Because the company of *sādhus* in the king's lands and from all directions sing his praises. [Let] the rest [be] as your lordship wills. For the ocean is not diminished by the rains [it sends forth], nor is it increased by the rivers [flowing into it].

As for the *Vṛtti-dīpikā* which [the Master] was writing, the news is as follows: he had finished seven chapters (*prakāś*), to which he had made additions and revisions. At the time of his death, he was [still] working on the eighth chapter, which has a great many (lit., "thousands" of) variant readings. Although this is unfortunate, most of the book is finished. Your lordship [also] asked which *sādhus* received teaching from the Master's blessed lips. What shall we say? Previously there were some 5 – 7 unaffiliated (*svatantra*) *sādhus* residing [here], but after the Master's death some of them left, and some of them are [busy] writing (or copying) books. So the book is finished, but unfortunately we do not have anyone here capable [of revising it]. [It is possible] someone [who could do it] will come from Ghaṇāserā for the festival at the *Dādū-dvārā*, but this remains to be seen.

We would have written earlier but were waiting for your letter first. If we can be of service to you in any way, please let us know. Farewell (lit., "Say 'God is truth'!").

Dated on the seventh [day] of the dark fortnight of Āsauj (= Āśvin = Sept./Oct.) *saṃvat* 1920 (i.e. 1863 C.E.).

From this letter we know that Nīścaldās died in Delhi in 1863. He was cremated on Nigambodh Ghāṭ on the Yamunā (still a major site for cremations today). At the time he would have been around seventy-two years old. The description of the huge crowds who gathered for his funeral gives us some indication of Nīścaldās's fame at the time of his death: "Such was [his] greatness," his disciples write, "that thousands of *sādhus*, brahmins, and merchants attended."

Another striking detail from the letter is that Niścaldās continued to teach up to the very end, delivering his final sermon (or “lecture,” *bhāṣaṇ*) just before he died.

The letter by Dayārām and Nand-rām is also evidence of Mahārāj Rām Singh’s continuing role as Niścaldās’s patron. This letter shows that there must at least have been a flow of money from Bundi to Kihaḍaulī at the time of Niścaldās’s death; this seems clear from his disciples’ itemized list of funeral expenses, as well as from the refined (but nevertheless unambiguous) appeal to the king’s generosity: “The ocean is not diminished by the rains [it sends forth].”

Finally, it is clear from the letter that Niścaldās was already regarded as a saint during his life. His disciples write that as his death approached “he manifested the signs of a sage living out his final days.” In a sense, the tradition of hagiography in praise of Niścaldās began long before any account of his life was committed to writing, and certainly long before Nārāyaṇdās; even during the funeral, we are told, “everyone, each in his own place, continually sang the praises of the Master’s birth and death.”

The practice of giving away food to celebrate the death of a *sant* is one of the most important ritual practices in the Dādū Panth. The letter mentions that two such feasts had already taken place—one in Delhi (no doubt at the Dādū *sthān*) and another at the *āśram* in Kihaḍaulī—and a third was being planned. According to Dvārikādās, the Dādū Panth held a *śraddhāñjali* for Niścaldās the following year (1864) at its headquarters in Narena.<sup>187</sup>

### Conclusions

Many of the details concerning Niścaldās’s life remain uncertain, resting as they do on a tangled web of sources, many of them composed long after Niścaldās’s death. The following

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<sup>187</sup> 1989, p. 12.

points can be asserted with confidence, however: Niścaldās was born in North India, probably not far from Delhi, in the late eighteenth century. He may have belonged to the *jāṭ* caste. He seems to have been initiated into the Dādū Panth and to have traveled to Banaras to study while still young. His life and work bear the stamp of this dual lineage: first, an initiatic, institutional, and vernacular lineage tracing back to the Dādū Panth; second, an intellectual, Sanskrit lineage tracing back to his study with pandits in Banaras. According to his own testimony, Niścaldās applied himself diligently to the study of Sanskrit grammar, Nyāya, and Sāṃkhya; more importantly, he claims not to have left a single work of Advaita Vedānta unread. After his time in Banaras, he returned to the region he was from and eventually settled in the small village of Kihaḍaulī (modern Kiḍoli), just west of Delhi. He spent most of the latter part of his life in teaching and writing. He composed three main works: the *Yukti-prakāś*; the *Vicār-sāgar*, which was finished in Kihaḍaulī; and the *Vṛtti-prabhākar*, which he was still revising at the time of his death. His fame reached the ears of Mahārāj Rām Singh of Bundi, who invited Niścaldās to visit his court, and who seems to have commissioned the *Vṛtti-prabhākar*. Niścaldās died in 1863, widely revered as both a scholar and a saint.

### CHAPTER 3 An Overview of *The Ocean of Inquiry*

*The significance of the vernacular – Hindi, Sanskrit, and Classical Hindi – Sources and models – Synopsis*

*The Ocean of Inquiry* was an intellectually ambitious undertaking: Nīścaldās attempts to bring together in a single work the fruits of a thousand years of philosophical and religious reflection within the tradition of Advaita Vedānta, as well as the views of many other schools. It is also a long work: the most widely available Hindi edition runs well over three hundred pages.<sup>188</sup> In the previous chapter, my focus was on the life of the author; in this chapter, I will provide an overview of the text: its language, the sources on which it is based, and its contents. This introductory material should help the reader situate the more narrowly focused textual study which is to follow in the second half of this dissertation.

*The significance of the vernacular*

We saw in the last chapter that Nīścaldās was thoroughly steeped in Sanskrit intellectual traditions, and we know he was fully capable of writing in Sanskrit (as we see in the Upanishad glosses he composed for his patron, Rām Singh of Bundi). Turning now to his magnum opus, *The Ocean of Inquiry*, we can begin by asking: why did he *choose* to write in the vernacular? And what is the significance of this choice?<sup>189</sup> These are the questions I will focus on in this section. Note that Nīścaldās himself draws a dichotomy between Sanskrit and the vernacular (*bhāṣā*), and for the purposes of this section I will let the dichotomy stand, though I intend to call it

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<sup>188</sup> Khemraj Shrikrishnadass edition (Nīścaldās 2003).

<sup>189</sup> It is impossible to write on vernacular traditions in South Asia without acknowledging the work of Sheldon Pollock, whose well-known study of processes of vernacularization (2006) is, at one level, an extended defense of the importance of *choice* in literary history.

into question in the next section, suggesting that Niścaldās's work in fact reflects *three* linguistic strands.

Niścaldās's decision to write in *bhāṣā*—more on this term shortly—rather than *saṃskṛta* was one that he himself felt was full of significance, as we know from his own references to it throughout his text. *The Ocean of Inquiry* is bookended by statements of his motive for writing in the vernacular, and he brings up the issue of Sanskrit versus the vernacular at least three times in the body of the text, too. Let us begin with his opening statement of motive. After the five benedictory verses that open *The Ocean of Inquiry*, Niścaldās announces his work:

[1.6] I will set forth this *Ocean of Inquiry*, which brims with the profound waters  
Of Vedic doctrines; the wise rejoice at beholding it.<sup>190</sup>

The next verse then offers an apology, as if anticipating the objection: “Why do we need another work on Vedānta?” Niścaldās explains:

[1.7] The [*Brahma*]-*sūtras*, [Śaṅkara's] *Bhāṣya*, [Sureśvara's] *Vārtikas*, and so on—many works have  
been written in the language of the gods.  
Nevertheless, I will compose in the vernacular, for the sake of dull-minded aspirants.<sup>191</sup>

The sense of the verse is that Niścaldās knows there are many works of Vedānta already, but he also knows there are people who are unable to read these works: the “dull-minded” or “slow-witted” (*mati-manda*). The commentary explains: “Dull-minded people cannot acquire knowledge (*bodh*) through Sanskrit works, but even they [are able to] acquire knowledge from vernacular works.”<sup>192</sup> The medium is different, and the fact of being unable to read Sanskrit is presented as a sign of mental inferiority; but Niścaldās does not believe that anything is lost by

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<sup>190</sup> VS pp. 1-2.

<sup>191</sup> VS p. 2. —The last part of the verse literally reads, “having beheld [those who are] dull-minded [and] ignorant.” I follow Pītāmbār's gloss (8, VS p. 2), which takes “ignorant” (*ajñāni*) as a general term referring to anyone lacking the knowledge of Brahman, and not as a comment on those who cannot read Sanskrit, since this is consistent with Niścaldās's use throughout the text. By contrast, *matimanda*, “dull-minded,” seems to refer specifically to those unable to learn Sanskrit.

<sup>192</sup> VS 1.7 comm., p. 2.



writing in the vernacular instead of in Sanskrit. This is a point worth stressing, because it is not any worldly knowledge at stake, but the knowledge that leads to liberation.

The equivalence of Nīścaldās's vernacular work with Sanskrit works—even with the Upanishads themselves—is made clear in the next chapter. In the course of describing the path to liberation, Nīścaldās explains that liberation comes about through hearing the statements contained in the Upanishads (*vedānta-vākya*). Up to this point, he is simply following the mainstream position in his tradition: Advaita Vedānta has always stressed the primacy of the Vedas as the sole means of the knowledge of Brahman. But Nīścaldās goes on to make a radical claim in which meaning (*artha*) is detached from the words (*śabda*) themselves. He writes: “[The term] Vedānta refers to the Upanishads. Although they are distinct from the present work, nonetheless, in this work are vernacular statements (*bhāṣā-vākya*) having the same meaning, [and] knowledge also arises from hearing them.”<sup>193</sup> In other words, works such as *The Ocean of Inquiry* are perfectly capable of communicating the meaning of the Vedas.

To a modern reader this might not seem a particularly heady claim, but for a classically trained Vedāntin, to separate the words of the Veda from their meaning is a bold move: Advaita Vedānta, following the lead of Mīmāṃsā, traditionally holds that the connection between Vedic words and their meaning is natural and eternal.<sup>194</sup> The communication of meaning does not depend merely on convention; Sanskrit words intrinsically possess the power to express their meaning. In the case of the Vedas this amounts to a sacred power, and Vedāntins from the time of Śaṅkara on have emphasized the uniqueness of the Vedas as a source of other-worldly knowledge (*alaukika-jñāna*). Nīścaldās's otherwise straightforward

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<sup>193</sup> VS 2.11 comm., p. 36.

<sup>194</sup> See Bronkhorst 2011 for a survey of classical Indian views of the connection between language and reality.

claim must be read against the weight of this tradition: in effect, he is claiming that *The Ocean of Inquiry* can stand in place of the Upanishads and therefore itself serve as the means to liberation.<sup>195</sup>

Niścaldās's choice to write in the vernacular is broached again in chapter 3. Here an opponent objects even more strongly, with an almost fundamentalist stress on the power of the words of the Vedas themselves: "Only through the revelation of the Vedas does knowledge arise following inquiry into the nature of the soul and Brahman. Neither through other Sanskrit works nor through vernacular works does [such] knowledge arise."<sup>196</sup> Niścaldās responds (in words later quoted by Vivekananda<sup>197</sup>):

[3.10] He who knows Brahman has the nature of Brahman; his words are Veda.  
Whether in the vernacular or in Sanskrit, they cut through the delusion of difference.<sup>198</sup>

Here we reach a climax in Niścaldās's claims for the power of the vernacular. In chapter 1, he simply states that he is writing for those too "dull-minded" to understand Sanskrit. In chapter 2, he clarifies that nothing is lost when writing in the vernacular; the same meanings are expressed in the vernacular as in Sanskrit. Here in chapter 3, he states his position (which was previously only implied) explicitly and boldly, identifying the words of the guru with the

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<sup>195</sup> Philosophy of language is discussed at length in VS chapter 6, including a consideration of a range of views on how word and meaning are connected. Niścaldās ends by defending (against the views of grammarians, Naiyāyikas, and Bhāṭṭa-mīmāṃsakas) what he identifies as the Vedāntic position, viz. that words have an innate capacity (*sāmarthya*) to express their meaning, just as fire has an innate capacity to burn (VS 6B.20, p. 253). Whether this view can be reconciled with his defense of the vernacular remains an open question: is every language a "natural" language?

<sup>196</sup> VS 3.9 comm., p. 59.

<sup>197</sup> "Reply to the Madras Address," *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, vol. 4, p. 288: "And here comes as a necessary consequence the broadest and most glorious idea of inspiration—not only as asserted and declared by the Rishis of the Vedas, not only by Vidura and Dharmavyadha and a number of others, but even the other day Nischaladas, a Tyagi of the Dadu-panthi sect, boldly declared in his Vichar-Sagar: 'He who has known Brahman has become Brahman. His words are Vedas, and they will expel the darkness of ignorance, either expressed in Sanskrit or any popular dialect.'"

<sup>198</sup> VS p. 59.

Veda.<sup>199</sup> What matters for Niścaldās is not the language of the Veda but the content of its teachings.

The logic Niścaldās uses to support his claim is curious. In the commentary to the verse just quoted, he writes: “He who knows Brahman has the nature of Brahman’: this point is well known from *śruti*.”<sup>200</sup> No doubt it is: versions of *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* 3.2.9, “When a man comes to know that highest brahman, he himself becomes that very Brahman,” are frequently quoted in Vedāntic writings.<sup>201</sup> What is interesting is that Niścaldās is appealing to *śruti* precisely in order to circumvent, or at least to mediate, its authority. His commentary continues: “Hence, his words have the nature of a Veda.”<sup>202</sup> The missing term in the syllogism is also remarkable here: the implication is that the Vedas should be understood as the words of Brahman. While there are precedents for this understanding within Advaita Vedānta—the Vedas are sometimes likened to the “breath” of Brahman—the idea that the authority of the Vedas derives from their divine origin is not a traditional Vedāntic position. Rather, the authority of the Vedas derives from their authorless character. For Mīmāṃsakas and Vedāntins, the authorlessness of the Vedas is precisely what ensures their reliability. Note that this line of thinking not only works to establish the authority of the Vedas; it simultaneously downgrades the authority of

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<sup>199</sup> As noted in the last chapter, the phrase “his words are Veda” (*tā kī bānī ved*) might well be a veiled reference to the works of Dādū, which are known in the Dādū Panth as *Dādū-vāṇī*. As a Dādū-panthī, Niścaldās would have obvious reason to defend the authority of vernacular sources of knowledge.

<sup>200</sup> VS 3.10 comm., p. 59.

<sup>201</sup> Trans. Olivelle 1998, p. 453. —The original (Olivelle 1998, p. 452) reads: *sa yo ha vai tat paramaṃ brahma veda brahmaiva bhavati*, often paraphrased in Vedāntic works as *brahmavid brahmaiva bhavati*, “The knower of Brahman becomes Brahman.”

<sup>202</sup> VS 3.10 comm., p. 59.

every other composition. By contrast, the idea that the authority of the Vedas rests on their divine origin opens the door to other works being granted authority.<sup>203</sup>

“There is no rule,” continues Niścaldās in his commentary, “that knowledge cannot arise without the statements of the Vedas. Just as a full knowledge of the diseases, their cures, and medicines which are spoken of in the Ayurveda can be had through other Sanskrit works as well as through vernacular and Persian works, so too can the knowledge of Brahman, the self of all, be had through vernacular works etc.”<sup>204</sup> For Niścaldās, it is not through any special power of Sanskrit words that knowledge arises, but through their meaning. Nor is it the case, as a traditionalist might counter, that the vernacular derives its power in virtue of its similarity to Sanskrit; the mention of Persian (*fārsī*) shows how far Niścaldās’s liberality on the question of language extends. He further supports his position with an appeal to works of *smṛti*: “All-knowing seers (*ṛṣi*) and sages (*muni*) have dealt with the knowledge of Brahman in works of *smṛti*, *purāṇas*, and *itihāsas*. If knowledge could not be had apart from the Vedas, all such works would be pointless. Hence, knowledge can arise from any statement which teaches the nature of the self, whether from the Vedas or not. The question is therefore settled: there can also be knowledge from vernacular works.”<sup>205</sup>

The choice to write in *bhāṣā*, therefore, was more than a choice to write in one language instead of another: it was to embrace a view of scriptural authority and the means to liberation that would have been sharply at odds with the views of more conservative Vedāntins and pandits. It is difficult to say how much resistance Niścaldās might have actually encountered in

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<sup>203</sup> It is perhaps not a coincidence that the main defenders of this “personalist” defense of the Vedas were the Naiyāyikas, whose Śaiva affiliations are well-known, and to whom this opening up of authority would not have been undesirable; the *āgamas*, after all, are also utterances of Íśvara.

<sup>204</sup> VS 3.10 comm., p. 59.

<sup>205</sup> VS 3.10 comm., pp. 59-60.

person. By Nīścaldās's time there were long-standing and well-respected traditions of vernacular composition in North India, and translations as well as original works of Vedānta were already in circulation, as I will discuss below in my section on Nīścaldās's sources. Whether or not Nīścaldās encountered personal opposition, however, it is at least true that he would not have taken trouble repeatedly to defend his choice to write in the vernacular were a certain ideological opposition not still "in the air" in the early nineteenth century. Pandit Pītāmbhar Puruṣottama, who in the decades after Nīścaldās's death composed a gloss on *The Ocean of Inquiry*, considered the authority of vernacular works of Vedānta still to be a pressing question: in spite of Nīścaldās's claim that "the question is settled," Pītāmbhar devotes an unusually long gloss to analyzing and refuting the position that liberating knowledge cannot arise from vernacular works. Perhaps his most interesting point is that Sanskrit is also a "vernacular" (*bhāṣā*): it just happens to be spoken by gods (*deva-bhāṣā*)!<sup>206</sup>

Although there are few Vedāntins today who would explicitly hold the position that knowledge cannot arise from non-Sanskrit works, traces of the position linger still. An interesting case is the Sanskrit translation of *The Ocean of Inquiry* by Vāsudeva Brahmendra Sarasvatī (d. 1931).<sup>207</sup> The editor of the published version (1964, second edition 1986), in an

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<sup>206</sup> Gloss 128, VS pp. 60-1: "What is the reason for insisting that knowledge cannot arise from vernacular (*bhāṣā*) works? Is it (1) because vernacular works are not in accordance with the Vedas? (2) simply because they are in the vernacular? (3) because they have not been produced by the body of an avatar? or (4) because they use incorrect forms? These are the four possibilities. As for the first, is the objection that they do not follow the exact wording of the Vedas, or that they do not accord with the meaning of the Vedas? Other Sanskrit works do not follow the exact wording of the Vedas either, so that cannot be right. As for their not following the meaning of the Vedas, that cannot be right either. Both other Sanskrit works and non-Sanskrit (*prākṛta*) works can accord with the meaning of the Vedas, just as both can yield knowledge of medicines etc. in Ayurveda. As for the second objection: even Sanskrit is a vernacular (*bhāṣā*)—for just as *prākṛta* is the vernacular among men, Sanskrit is the vernacular among the gods. Both are alike in being *bhāṣās*. As for the third possibility, plenty of Sanskrit works that were not composed by avatars yield knowledge. As for the fourth possibility, that vernacular (*bhāṣā*) works use incorrect forms: as [Nīścaldās] discusses in section 401 [VS 6B.11 comm., p. 245], according to the rules of the vernacular (*prākṛta*), Sanskrit works use incorrect forms. Likewise, according to the rules of Sanskrit, vernacular (*prākṛta*) works use incorrect forms. Both are equivalent in their incorrectness ... ."

<sup>207</sup> Date per Bhuvaneshwari 2010, p. 24.

English-language preface, explains one reason a Sanskrit version of Nīścaldās's text was necessary:

[I]n a work on Advaita every argument should be supported by quotations from the Upaniṣads and relevant [sic] texts. For, the Vedāntas alone are the supreme and final authorities on matters of Advaita. This important item has been completely neglected by the authors [editors?] of the Vicārasāgara so far in print. But great care has been taken in the Sanskrit Vicārasāgara to see that every required argument establishing the Advaita truths is clearly enunciated along with the relevant and ample quotations from the Upaniṣads and allied texts. In the first taranga [chapter] itself more than eighty quotations are given in this work.<sup>208</sup>

The Sanskrit translation is thus presented as an improved version of Nīścaldās's text—as if an author of Nīścaldās's learning could not have peppered his work with supporting quotations had he so desired! The editor's criticism is helpful, however, in drawing our attention to an absence we might otherwise miss: in the whole of *The Ocean of Inquiry*, there are only two quotations from the Vedas.<sup>209</sup>

Like Nīścaldās's decision to write in the vernacular, this, too, must be viewed as a deliberate choice. The very absence of frequent appeals to the words of the Vedas reinforces the sense that *The Ocean of Inquiry* is a comprehensive and self-sufficient work, an “ocean” in which everything needful for liberation can be found. “Every subject useful to self-knowledge has been investigated in detail,” Nīścaldās writes, in a line happily repeated by his posthumous publisher in a sales prospectus for the new book. The line is carried over into the Sanskrit translation, and obviously the translator highly valued Nīścaldās's work. Nonetheless, at the very end of his translation, in a section the editor has labeled “The Reason for the Composition of This Work in Sanskrit,” the translator includes some rather surprising verses:

“Those who forsake the divine language [Sanskrit] and listen to sāstras

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<sup>208</sup> 1986, p. xli.

<sup>209</sup> Both are given just before VS 5.16, p. 123. The context of the two quotations is worth noting: they are part of an extended refutation of non-Advaita schools of Vedānta, a refutation intentionally based on appeals to authority rather than the methods of analysis and argument which Nīścaldās favors elsewhere; this passage is part of the guru's teaching to a disciple identified as less intelligent than the others.

Composed in other languages indeed will go to hell.”<sup>210</sup>

The present work [was composed] because of interdictions such as this, which occur in many authoritative texts,  
As well as for the sake of mental purification and the acquiring of merit.<sup>211</sup>

Note that Vāsudeva Brahmendra Sarasvatī wrote these verses not in the distant Indian past but in the late-nineteenth or early-twentieth century. Here we have a clear indication that conservative Brahminical traditions were not entirely supplanted by modern forms of Hinduism but continued to exist alongside them. If this was the case in the late-nineteenth or early-twentieth century, it is not difficult to imagine Niścaldās facing ideological opposition in his own day; at the very least, his contention that vernacular works can virtually stand in the place of the Upanishads must have created unease in some quarters.

Linguistic exclusivism is not the sole province of Sanskrit pandits, however. This point comes through clearly in a story recounted by Nārāyaṇdās in his hagiographical account of Niścaldās’s life. The truth of the story is doubtful, but it nonetheless sheds light on a further dimension of the implications of Niścaldās’s choice to write in India: the close connections between language and community. Nārāyaṇdās records that Niścaldās once proposed, at a Dādū-panthī assembly, to translate the works of Dādū into Sanskrit, so that they might attract the interest of Sanskrit scholars. Nārāyaṇdās has the *sants* respond:

“Scholars already have many works in Sanskrit. A translation will always remain a translation; it cannot capture the greatness of the original. If scholars have faith, let them read *Śrī Dādū-vāṇī* just as it is. If one lacks faith, one will be unable to attain anything special, even if one reads it in Sanskrit. The language is fine as it is, just as it was pronounced from the blessed lotus lips of Śrī Dādū-jī.” Then Pandit Niścaldās fell silent and said nothing.<sup>212</sup>

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<sup>210</sup> *divyāṃ bhāṣāṃ parityajya hy anyabhāṣākṛtāni vai / śāstrāṇi ye praśṛṇvanti te vai nirayagāminah* // —The verse appears to be from the *Śeṣadharmaprakaraṇa* (cf. v. 20.58) of the *Harivaṃśa*.

<sup>211</sup> Vāsudeva Brahmendra Sarasvatī, p. 376.

<sup>212</sup> Nārāyaṇdās, vol. 2, pp. 838-9.

The truth this story does capture is that a jealous guardianship of language and sacred texts is not the sole prerogative of Brahmins or Sanskrit pandits. The *sants* in Nārāyaṇdās's story are the counterparts of a pandit who, in another story Nārāyaṇdās tells, cannot understand why a scholar of Niścaldās's learning would write in the vernacular.<sup>213</sup> In both stories, Niścaldās is presented as attempting to build a bridge between Sanskrit and vernacular communities.<sup>214</sup>

Niścaldās's choice to write in the vernacular is thus more significant than it might first appear, entailing issues of scriptural authority, the path to liberation, claims to the uniqueness of Sanskrit, *śāstric* prohibitions of vernacular works, and the connections between language and community. Of all these issues, the closest to Niścaldās's heart was the path to liberation. His discussions of the vernacular in *The Ocean of Inquiry* always stress the practical import of his work: to lead to liberation aspirants who, though qualified in every other way, are unable to read Sanskrit. As he writes in a verse at the end of his work, in choosing to compose in the vernacular rather than Sanskrit, he "felt not a trace of shame. There is a single reason for this: compassion is the crown of *dharma*."<sup>215</sup>

### *Hindi, Sanskrit, and Classical Hindi*

I have spoken of Niścaldās's decision to write in "the vernacular." But exactly what language does this term refer to? The question is more complicated than it might seem. The simplest answer is "Hindi," but that term itself becomes complicated when used to refer to anything except the standardized dialect of Kharī Bolī (often known as "Modern Standard Hindi") spoken throughout north India today. When we turn to earlier forms of Hindi, the waters are

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<sup>213</sup> Nārāyaṇdās, vol. 2, p. 838.

<sup>214</sup> Incidentally, the works of Dādū were translated into Sanskrit in the twentieth century (see Hastings 2002, p. 298).

<sup>215</sup> VS 7.113, p. 327.



muddled, and one is tempted to dismiss “Hindi” as about as useful a linguistic designator as, say, “Western European.” As Busch has recently noted:

Premodern Hindi literature is complex and highly variable in both literary and social register; it has a vast, and vastly confusing, geographical domain in comparison to other Indian vernaculars. . . . Avadhi, Brajbhasha, Gujri, Rajasthani, Pingal, Dingal, Sadhukkari, Hindustani, Dihlavi, Purbi Zaban, Dakani, and Rekhta are just a sampling of terms referring to some kind of proto-Hindi (or the closely related proto-Urdu) literary culture, and attempting to understand what these names meant to all the people who used them over the last half millennium or more is a losing proposition.<sup>216</sup>

Nonetheless, as Busch also notes, one cannot do without terms,<sup>217</sup> and two terms in particular might usefully be applied to Niścaldās’s language. The first is “Brajbhāṣā,” literally “the language of Braj,” though its actual use spread far beyond the actual region of Braj. A second useful term is the less geographically specific label of “classical Hindi,” suggested by Rupert Snell’s use of the phrase “the Hindi classical tradition” to refer to Brajbhāṣā and Avadhī literature, a term which at once avoids undue associations with the region of Braj (and its Vaiṣṇava poets) and aptly suggests the literary nature of the language.<sup>218</sup> For as Busch points out, “the poets who cultivated vernacular literature did not as a rule write the same language they spoke.”<sup>219</sup>

Niścaldās himself refers to his language simply as *bhāṣā*, or “(spoken) language.” As we saw in the last section, he typically uses the term to contrast his language with Sanskrit, which is why I have consistently translated the term as “the vernacular.” One passage quoted in the previous section stands out, however, for listing Persian (*fārsī*) alongside Sanskrit and *bhāṣā*,

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<sup>216</sup> 2011, pp. 7-8.

<sup>217</sup> 2011, p. 7.

<sup>218</sup> Snell 1991, p. ix: “[U]ntil about the middle of the nineteenth century, the literatures of the ‘Hindi’-speaking area were dominated by other dialects [than Kharī Bolī], principal of which were Braj Bhāṣā and Avadhī. Braj Bhāṣā in particular gained a literary currency well beyond the borders of the area where it was (and is) spoken as a mother-tongue . . . and its linguistic and literary conventions were enthusiastically adopted for a wider range of court and popular verse.”

<sup>219</sup> 2011, p. 6.

which suggests that the latter term does *not* refer to just any spoken language for Niścaldās, but rather picks out a particular language.<sup>220</sup>

*The Ocean of Inquiry* consists of root verses together with a long prose commentary by Niścaldās himself. The most immediately striking fact about Niścaldās's language when one reads the verses and the commentary together is that he is not, in fact, writing in a single, unified language at all. The verses and the commentary are written in such different registers that, for all practical purposes, we can speak of two distinct (albeit closely related) dialects in *The Ocean of Inquiry*. First there is the language of the verses, which falls comfortably within the range of "Brajbhāṣā" or "classical Hindi." Then there is the language of the commentary, which, quite apart from the differences one would expect between Brajbhāṣā poetry and prose,<sup>221</sup> is grammatically and morphologically much closer to an early form of Khaṛī Bolī than is the language of the root verses. This is precisely what one would expect based on Niścaldās's biography: the dialect of Khaṛī Bolī belongs to Delhi and its surrounding regions, where Niścaldās was born, received his earliest education, and settled after returning from Banaras. The commentary almost certainly reflects the language Niścaldās would have spoken on a daily basis, and this too fits with the biographical reports, for *The Ocean of Inquiry* is said to have emerged from Niścaldās's daily teaching sessions with disciples and visitors. The most common verse-form in the text is the *dohā*, which is more or less the Hindi equivalent of a *śloka*, and which is well-suited for memorization.<sup>222</sup> Likely Niścaldās would have taught by

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<sup>220</sup> The use of a generic term to refer to a particular language which then becomes treated, consciously or unconsciously, as the prototype or assumed norm of everyday spoken language might be compared to the use of the word "people" as a proper noun in, e.g., Inuit dialects.

<sup>221</sup> Cf. McGregor's 1968 study of Indrajit of Orchā's Brajbhāṣā prose style.

<sup>222</sup> Niścaldās's *dohās* continued to be memorized and recited long after his death, even when the text was widely available in print. Dādū (1994, p. 1) reports being taught some of the *dohās* in childhood.

reciting verses from *The Ocean of Inquiry*, or having his disciples memorize them, and then providing oral commentary on the verses. Further evidence for this mode of composition can be found in a commentary provided by Pītāmbār on the five opening verses of *The Ocean of Inquiry*; according to Sālemahammad, this commentary was based on oral commentary that Nīscaldās transmitted to a group of *sādhus* including Trilok-rām, and Trilok-rām to Pītāmbār.<sup>223</sup>

If the language of the commentary reflects Nīscaldās’s actual spoken language, the verses, by contrast, have an artificial quality—by which I mean that they are the products of self-conscious literary artifice. For if the “Hindi” of the commentary is a true vernacular, the “Hindi” of the root verses is in fact a classical language; and this is precisely why it is appropriate to speak of this language as “classical Hindi.” To quote again from Busch: “[Pre-modern Hindi] Literature, particularly of the type composed in courtly settings, was considered a special arena of culture: it was formal, often tradition-bound, and could only be written in languages that, by a complex process, earned the dignity of being considered literary.”<sup>224</sup> Busch is speaking especially of court poets and belles-lettres, but the remark applies equally to the tradition of classical Hindi religious poetry to which Nīscaldās was heir.

Although his choice to write in “the vernacular” thus does represent a break with one form of classical tradition—the Sanskrit classical tradition—it nonetheless continues the tradition of classical Hindi. That this tradition was indeed a classical tradition with its own rules and expectations, and that it differed from the language Nīscaldās and those around him actually spoke, comes through in a remarkable passage tucked away in the middle of chapter six of *The Ocean of Inquiry*. The immediate context is a verse in which the guru tells the disciple

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<sup>223</sup> See Sālemahammad’s introduction (*prastāvanā*) to the VS (Nīscaldās 2003, intro. p. 9).

<sup>224</sup> 2011, p. 6.

that once the essence of the Vedas has been grasped, “boundless samsara will effortlessly vanish.”<sup>225</sup> The word for effortlessly is *anayāsa*, which comes from the Sanskrit *āyāsa* (“effort”) plus the prefix *an-* (“not”). Even in Hindi, the standard form should thus be *anāyāsa* and not *anayāsa*. In the commentary, Niścaldās feels obliged to explain: “Although the word used for effort here is *āyāsa*, and the word for its absence should be *anāyāsa*, nevertheless, for the sake of meter it is read as *anayāsa*. In *bhāṣā*, there is no fault in substituting, for the sake of meter, a light [syllable] in place of a heavy, or a heavy [syllable] in place of a light.”<sup>226</sup> Classical Hindi meters do indeed allow for such substitutions. The remarkable part of the commentary comes in the points Niścaldās goes on to make about orthography: “Instead of *mokṣa*,” he writes, “the [spelling] in *bhāṣā* is *mocha*. Why? This is the convention in *bhāṣā*.” He then gives two verses:

1. For the sake of meter, light [syllables] [can] become heavy, [and] heavy [syllables] light. *Rū* [can occur] in place of *aru* (“and”) and *va* in place of *ab* (“now”).
2. [For] the conjunct *kṣa* [one should use] *cha*, and [for] *kha* [one should use] *ṣa*; [one should] not [use] the retroflex *ṇa*.  
*ṛ* and *l* are not [used] in *bhāṣā*, nor [is] the palatal *śa*.<sup>227</sup>

Ostensibly Niścaldās is drawing a contrast between Sanskrit and the vernacular, but what is interesting is that throughout *The Ocean of Inquiry* Niścaldās himself sometimes uses the “Sanskrit” rather than the vernacular spellings he advocates in this verse.<sup>228</sup> Note that the verse quoted above is not descriptive but prescriptive, as the commentary following the second verse makes clear: “These letters,” Niścaldās writes, “do not appear in *bhāṣā*. If someone writes [with them], poets (*kavi*) will call [it] incorrect (*aśuddh*, lit. ‘impure’). In *bhāṣā*

<sup>225</sup> VS 6B.11, p. 245.

<sup>226</sup> VS 6B.11 comm., p. 245.

<sup>227</sup> These two verses (which have their own numbering) appear between VS 6B.11 and 12, pp. 245-6. For the second verse, I have followed the reading in Dādū (1994, p. 280).

<sup>228</sup> Here it is best to rely on Dvārikādās’s edition (1989), which faithfully reproduces the spellings from an early manuscript; other editions tend to modernize Niścaldās’s orthography. In Dvārikādās’s edition, *kṣa*, *ṇ*, and *śa* are indeed avoided, but not *ṛ* or *kha*.

one should write *cha* in place of *kṣa*, *ṣa* in place of *kha*, the letter *na* in place of *ṇa*, *ri* and *lri* in place of *ṛ* and *ḷ*, [and] the letter *sa* in place of the letter *śa*.”<sup>229</sup> This passage provides further evidence that we are dealing with a classical tradition in its own right, with custodians of the tradition (the *bhāṣā-kavis*) prescribing set forms of language and pronouncing non-standard forms “incorrect.”

From the remark just quoted we see that a Hindi speaker such as Niścaldās, writing in the early- to mid-nineteenth century, was well aware of the differences between *tadbhava* and *tatsama* forms of words; but far from desiring to “correct” or “purify” existing forms, Niścaldās identifies the Sanskrit forms as “incorrect.” He does so not simply because the *tadbhava* forms are the forms of everyday speech, but because these were the forms hallowed by the poetic traditions of classical Hindi. One is reminded of the work of Thomas Duer Broughton, a British officer who, with the help of Indian troops who served as his oral informants, put together the first published anthology of Hindi poetry (1814). Broughton was apparently unaware that Hindi, like Sanskrit and Persian, had a rich classical heritage, and he mistakenly presents the poems as “rustic” and “popular”—when in fact they are mostly by highly refined court poets such as Keśavdās!<sup>230</sup>

The lesson in all of this is that *bhāṣā* should not be conflated with popular or current speech. Niścaldās’s work in fact reflects three distinct but related strands: Sanskrit, which looms as the linguistic other against which *bhāṣā* is compared; *bhāṣā* in the strict sense of a classical or literary form of Hindi, with a received canon of literature, meters, and linguistic

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<sup>229</sup> Comm. to the second verse, VS p. 246. —The Khemraj Shrikrishnadass edition says “*kha* in place of *ṣa*,” but this is clearly a mistake.

<sup>230</sup> On Broughton’s work, see Bangha 2000. (Broughton’s references to the poems as “rustic” and “popular” are on p. 12.)

rules; and *bhāṣā* in the looser sense of a true vernacular, the everyday language Niścaldās spoke.

Once we distinguish these three strands, it follows that Niścaldās was in fact the inheritor of not one but two classical traditions, the Sanskritic and the *bhāṣā*. He is not simply a vernacular writer engaging with a classical Sanskrit tradition; he is a speaker of a particular vernacular dialect engaging with both classical Sanskrit *and* classical Hindi traditions—a point not sufficiently appreciated by other scholars. And this situation makes perfect sense given Niścaldās’s biography as discussed in the previous chapter: he was shaped by two related but distinct intellectual and religious worlds: on the one hand, as a member of the Dādū Panth he was heir to a pre-existing lineage of vernacular thought and literature; on the other hand, in Banaras he received training in Sanskrit intellectual traditions. The content of Niścaldās’s teachings in *The Ocean of Inquiry* seems to derive primarily, if not exclusively, from Sanskrit traditions—so much so that without the handful of verses invoking Dādū (quoted in the previous chapter), one would be hard-pressed to find internal evidence of his Dādū-panthī affiliation. The *form* of his teachings—verses composed in more or less the same classical Hindi and using the same meters as the Dādū-panthī authors whose works he would have memorized—nonetheless points to the unavoidable, if largely unacknowledged, influence of a classical vernacular tradition.

#### *Sources and models*

In the closing verses of *The Ocean of Inquiry*, Niścaldās claims that he left not a single work of Advaita Vedānta unread,<sup>231</sup> and this does not seem like much of an exaggeration: the range of

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<sup>231</sup> VS 7.111b, p. 327.

sources he cites in *The Ocean of Inquiry* and the *Vṛtti-prabhākar*<sup>232</sup> together is formidable, covering just about every major work of Advaita Vedānta and many minor ones; and he could of course have read many works that go uncited.<sup>233</sup> This is not to say that Niścaldās read *every* work of Advaita Vedānta, but it seems fair to say that he probably read every work available to him. The list of sources provided below is thus helpful not only for understanding *The Ocean of Inquiry* but also for getting a sense of what Vedāntic texts were circulating, at least in Banaras, in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Below is a list of Sanskrit works mentioned by Niścaldās in *The Ocean of Inquiry*. One should note that there are many passages in the text in which Niścaldās is clearly indebted to a source but does not refer to it explicitly. One notable example (which I do not believe has been noticed by other scholars): much of VS chapter 7 is in fact an adaptation (or outright translation) of Madhusūdana Sarasvatī's *Prasthāna-bheda*, though Niścaldās never mentions this fact. Indeed, Niścaldās's style in *The Ocean of Inquiry* in general tends to be one in which he presents ideas directly without mentioning other texts, except in the few instances when he needs to cite an authority, or in the relatively common cases in which he is attempting to reconcile different strands of Vedāntic teaching.

#### SANSKRIT SOURCES MENTIONED IN THE OCEAN OF INQUIRY

*Brahma-sūtras* + Śaṅkara's *bhāṣya*  
Sureśvara's *Vārttika* on the *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣadbhāṣya*  
Ānandagiri's gloss on Sureśvara's *Vārttika*  
*Pañcīkaraṇa-vārttika* (attrib. to Sureśvara)

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<sup>232</sup> My survey here will focus on *The Ocean of Inquiry*. Pahlajrai, who is currently working on the *Vṛtti-prabhākar*, reports that it contains references to "over fifty texts and forty authors by name connected with *vyākaraṇa*, *nyāya*, Advaita, and other fields" (2009, p. 53).

<sup>233</sup> To give a single example, he never once quotes from the *Ātma-purāṇa*, but it must have been known to him, since Kākārāma, one of his main teachers in Banaras, wrote a commentary on it.

*Bhagavad-gītā* + Śaṅkara's *bhāṣya*  
*Samkṣepa-sārīraka* of Sarvajñātman  
*[Tattva]-cintāmaṇi* of Gaṅgeśa  
*Yoga-vāsiṣṭha*  
*Khaṇḍana-khaṇḍa-khāḍya* of Śrīharṣa  
*Advaita-siddhi* of Madhusūdana Sarasvatī  
*Pañcadaśī* of Vidyāraṇya  
*Vedānta-muktāvalī*  
*Advaita-dīpikā* of Nṛsiṃhāśrama  
Vācaspati's *Bhāmatī* on the *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya*  
Prakāśātman's *Vivaraṇa* on the *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya*  
*Kārikās* of Gauḍapāda  
Ānandagiri's gloss on Śaṅkara's *bhāṣya* on Gauḍapāda's *Kārikās*  
*Nṛsiṃha-Tāpinī Upaniṣad*  
*Yoga-sūtras* of Patañjali  
*Vedānta-paribhāṣā* of Dharmarāja Adhvarīndra  
*Naiṣkarmya-siddhi* of Sureśvara  
*Vaiyākaraṇa-bhūṣaṇa*  
*Hari-kārikās*  
*Darpaṇa* (a work on philosophy of language)  
*Vākyavṛtti* (attrib. to Śaṅkara)  
*Upadeśa-sāhasrī* of Śaṅkara  
Nīlakaṇṭha's gloss on the *Mahābhārata*  
Appayadīkṣita's *Parimala-ṭīkā* on the *Kalpataru*

Among these sources, special mention must be made of the *Pañcadaśī* of Vidyāraṇya, to which Nīścaldās refers more frequently than any other work, and with which most (though by no means all) of Nīścaldās's positions on metaphysics, cosmology, epistemology, and soteriology conform.<sup>234</sup>

Vidyāraṇya was himself a great synthesizer, and his work provided a model for Nīścaldās's project, at least in its doctrinal content. As for the form of *The Ocean of Inquiry*, models are much harder to find. There are a vast number of works on Advaita Vedānta, many of them unpublished, so I hesitate to make any final pronouncement on the stylistic originality of Nīścaldās's work. But if we are to go by the canon of well-known Advaita works, *The Ocean of Inquiry* certainly seems to be doing something unprecedented. There were already *prakaraṇa-*

<sup>234</sup> On the influence of the *Pañcadaśī* on the VS, see Bhuvaneshwari 2010, pp. 16-19.



and *saṃgraha*-style works presenting synthetic overviews of Advaita Vedānta. The *Vedānta-sāra*, to give one of the best-known examples, must have been known to Niścaldās, but it does not seem to have influenced his own work greatly (and he specifically rejects the central role which Sadānanda gives to *samādhi*). There were also a number of works making use of the form of a dialogue between a teacher and a student, e.g., Śaṅkara's *Upadeśa-sāhasrī* and the medieval *Viveka-cuḍāmaṇi* (attributed to Śaṅkara). But nowhere among the works of Advaita Vedānta that are well known today do we find a dialogue in which a guru instructs multiple students. Niścaldās's innovation serves as an elegant and pedagogically significant device to synthesize a vast array of Vedāntic teachings. Niścaldās begins the main portion of *The Ocean of Inquiry* with the lines: "Now I will set forth in verse a new dialogue between a guru and his disciples. / Seekers of knowledge who study it will become skilled in inquiry."<sup>235</sup> Pītāmbār's gloss takes "new" (*navīna*) simply to mean recent in composition and not merely a translation of ancient dialogues.<sup>236</sup> But we might equally take "new" in the sense of unprecedented, in which case the verse that begins the tale of the three brothers becomes a self-conscious proclamation of stylistic originality.

I have so far dealt only with Sanskrit sources and models, but it is important to discuss earlier Hindi sources and models, too. In a recent survey of Advaita literature in Hindi, S. K. Shrivastava skips straight from an introductory discussion of the *nirguṇa-bhakti* poems of the *sants* to a discussion of Niścaldās, leaving readers to imagine that Niścaldās was the first Advaita Vedāntin to write in Hindi.<sup>237</sup> Pahlajrai gives a similar impression when he writes: "Niścaldās is the first author to write an Advaita Vedānta *prakaraṇa-grantha* ('independent

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<sup>235</sup> VS 4.1, p. 64.

<sup>236</sup> Gloss 133, VS p. 64.

<sup>237</sup> Shrivastava 2000.

treatise') in Hindi, be it verse or prose, a philosophical work of rigor comparable to those in Sanskrit. In doing so, he possibly was influenced by the Dādūpanthī tradition of writing in the vernacular and so making their works widely accessible to the average person."<sup>238</sup> It is indeed reasonable to assume that Niścaldās's Dādū-panthī affiliation influenced him in his decision to write in Hindi. But he was not the first Advaitin to do so; we have Niścaldās himself as witness to this fact.

Early in chapter 1 of *The Ocean of Inquiry* Niścaldās writes: "Poets have composed many well-known works in the vernacular; / [but] without *The Ocean of Inquiry*, doubts will not be destroyed."<sup>239</sup> His commentary on this verse makes it clear that he is referring specifically to vernacular works on Advaita:

Although there are many works in the vernacular, nevertheless, aside from *The Ocean of Inquiry*, these works will not remove doubts about the nature of the self. The reason for this is as follows: some of these works, like the *Pañc-bhāṣā* (Five Vernacular [Treatises]) were composed [merely] on the basis of hearing (*śravaṇa*). In some places the discussions in these works are in accord with the *śāstras*, but in other places the correct meaning of what was heard was not grasped, and the works are opposed to the *śāstras*. No sure knowledge is attainable from this kind of work. Other works in the vernacular, like *Ātma-bodh* (Knowledge of the Self), were composed after a partial study of the *śāstras*. Sure knowledge is not attainable through these works either, as their treatment of Vedānta is incomplete.<sup>240</sup>

Pītāmbār glosses the *Pañc-bhāṣā* as the works of Manohar Dās (who belonged to the *nirañjanī sampradāy*), and *Ātma-bodh* as the work of *sādhu* Śrī Māṇak Dās. Note that these are not the only works of their kind either. Indeed, this passage leads one to conclude that Niścaldās was motivated to write in Hindi not simply out of a desire to reach a wide audience, but also to correct what he regarded as the misinformation prevalent in vernacular works of Advaita Vedānta. This amounts to a very different picture than that of Niścaldās as striking a radically

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<sup>238</sup> 2009, p. 57.

<sup>239</sup> VS 1.8, p. 3.

<sup>240</sup> VS 1.8 comm., p. 3.

new path. Nīścaldās presents his work as standing apart not because it is in the vernacular, but because it “comprises a full treatment and accords with the *Vedānta-sāstras*.” “The present work,” he concludes, “is therefore unlike other works in the vernacular; indeed, it is superior to them all.”<sup>241</sup>

Surprisingly, no one has yet undertaken a study of early Hindi works of Vedānta. Histories of Advaita Vedānta as well as histories of Indian philosophy routinely ignore Hindi works; and scholars focusing on early Hindi in turn have not focused on philosophical works. Early scholarship on classical Hindi was dominated by the study of *bhakti* texts, especially the rich corpus of devotional songs. In recent times, the breadth of classical Hindi literature has begun to be recognized, and the net of inquiry has been cast wider to include historical and literary works, especially those produced in a courtly milieu. The process of vernacularization seems to have reached even further, however, and there is a large body of classical Hindi materials that remains unstudied, materials that do not fall neatly into the categories either of *bhakti* literature or of courtly literature. Blumhardt’s catalogue of Hindi manuscripts in the British Library lists roughly a dozen works of Vedānta from the seventeenth to early nineteenth centuries; many more such works are described in the five-volume *Hastalikhita Hindī granthom kī khoja kā vivaraṇa* of the Nagari Pracharini Sabha.<sup>242</sup> To my knowledge, these works have never been studied, and they would likely offer an important window to the circulation and development of Vedānta, especially among *sādhus*, in the early modern period. While it would be premature to make bold claims about the importance of these texts—which I hope to study in the future—it is quite possible that they provide a missing link between

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<sup>241</sup> VS 1.8 comm., p. 3.

<sup>242</sup> Blumhardt 1899, pp. 51-7; Dāsa 1995-1998.

classical Vedānta and the popularization of Vedānta in the colonial period; in any case the dissemination of Vedāntic ideas in a vernacular milieu is worthy of further investigation.

In addition to these Vedāntic works in early Hindi, there is the question of whether Niścaldās found any sources or models among the works of Dādū-panthī literature with which he was no doubt familiar. *The Ocean of Inquiry* makes use of a wide variety of Hindi meters, and he would have to have learned these meters somewhere and to have studied models. So, even though (apart from the passage just quoted above) Niścaldās never cites a vernacular work in *The Ocean of Inquiry*, this does not mean that he drew solely from Sanskrit traditions, rendering them straightforwardly into the language of the people; the very process of rendering Vedāntic ideas into classical Hindi verse meant drawing from (and contributing to) a pre-existing vernacular tradition. Besides, the influence from vernacular sources seems to go further. Sūrat-rām Dādū points to at least one close parallel between a verse in *The Ocean of Inquiry* and a verse by Sundardās.<sup>243</sup> Indeed, Sundardās's best-known work, which an educated Dādū-panthī could not possibly have been unaware of, is known as *The Ocean of Knowledge* (*jñāna-samudra*). Although the content of this work differs significantly from that of *The Ocean of Inquiry*, Sundardās's work is also in dialogue form, and it too attempts a synthesis of various traditions culminating in non-dual Vedānta. It seems clear that *The Ocean of Knowledge* must have served as a model for Niścaldās. The question then becomes: why does Niścaldās nowhere mention or acknowledge Sundardās's work—a question no doubt related to why there are so few traces of sectarian identity in *The Ocean of Inquiry*. These remain open questions in need of further research, but it seems to me that we are once again seeing the signs of a conscious

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<sup>243</sup> 1994, pp. 151-2.

decision: in this case, it was perhaps a decision to downplay his sectarian affiliation in order to position himself as an authoritative representative of Sanskrit intellectual traditions.

### *Synopsis*

In this final section I will offer a synopsis of the contents of *The Ocean of Inquiry*, to complete the introductory overview in this chapter and to prepare the reader for the second half of this dissertation, which will offer an interpretation of the meaning and purpose of inquiry (*vicāra*) in the text. The *Ocean of Inquiry* is divided into seven chapters, or “waves” (*taraṅga*) as they are called in the original. Chapters 1-3 (running 63 pages in the printed edition<sup>244</sup>) are introductory:

- Chapter 1 (19 pages) introduces the path to liberation through knowledge and the prerequisites for embarking on this path. The chapter opens with five *maṅgala* verses and three verses proclaiming the uniqueness of the work. Nīścaldās spends the rest of the chapter going one by one through the four *anubandhas*—qualification (*adhikāra*), subject-matter (*viṣaya*), aim (*prayojana*), and connection (*saṁbandha*). The path to liberation is outlined in some detail in the course of his discussion of *adhikāra*.
- Chapter 2 (36 pages) is divided into two parts. The first half is a series of objections to each of the four *anubandhas* as described by Nīścaldās in the previous chapter. The second half contains Nīścaldās’s replies. Notable are his discussions of the desirability of liberation, the rarity of finding someone possessed of *adhikāra*, and the possibility of liberation through knowledge.

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<sup>244</sup> Following the widely available Khemraj Shrikrishnadass reprint (Nīścaldās 2003).

- Chapter 3 (8 pages) describes the ideal characteristics of teachers and students. Niścaldās stresses the indispensable role of the teacher on the path to liberation. The words of a realized teacher, he says, are equivalent to the Veda, and service to one's teacher is even greater than service to the Lord (*Īśvara*).

Chapters 4-6 (constituting the bulk of the work, 265 pages) sets forth the tale of the three brothers, who bear the allegorical names Tattvadr̥ṣṭi ("He who sees the truth"), Adr̥ṣṭi ("He who does not see"), and Tarkadr̥ṣṭi ("He who sees [only] logic"). Eldest, middle, and youngest, the three brothers represent the three grades of student: high, middle, and low. Told by their father, Śubhasantati ("He of the auspicious offspring," or as I like to think of him, "King Goodsons"), that he plans to renounce the world, and hearing from him of the cares of kingship and the sorrows of worldly life, the three princes themselves renounce the world and seek out a guru to show them the way to liberation. Just sixteen verses into the chapter they find a true guru, whom they serve for six months. The three brothers sit together at his feet, and each in turn has a chance to ask the guru questions. The three chapters record the guru's dialogue with each of the brothers.

- Chapter 4 records the dialogue with Tattvadr̥ṣṭi, the highest grade of student, whose mind is sharp and who grasps the guru's teachings relatively quickly. This chapter presents the essentials of Advaita Vedānta: the identity of self and Brahman, the nature of illusion, the removal of ignorance, etc. It also includes the longest sustained discussion of epistemology.
- Chapter 5 records the dialogue with Adr̥ṣṭi, the middle grade of student, whose mind is slow to grasp the guru's teaching. The guru eventually shifts his approach with Adr̥ṣṭi

altogether, giving him detailed instructions on *nirguṇa-upāsanā*, presented by Niścaldās as a path of meditation on Brahman as the essence of the cosmos and on the self as identical to Brahman. This chapter includes a detailed account of the successive stages of the creation of the cosmos.

- Chapter 6 records the dialogue with Tarkadṛṣṭi, the lowest grade of student, whose mind is sharp but who is full of doubts. The chapter presents the main teachings of Advaita Vedānta again and considers further objections and the teachings of other schools. Special attention is given to the doctrine of *dṛṣṭi-sṛṣṭi*, or subjective idealism, and there is a thorough treatment of philosophy of language.

Chapter 7 concludes the text with the after-story of the three brothers. **Tattvadṛṣṭi** achieves liberation-in-life (*jīvan-mukti*) at the end of his dialogue with the guru. There is no fixed rule for the behavior of one who has reached this state, Niścaldās tells us. There follows a long excursus, by way of response to an objection, on yogic practices, which Niścaldās argues are not necessary to preserve the state of liberation. Next we learn that **Adṛṣṭi** spends the remainder of his days in meditation on the banks of the Ganges, eventually passing on to the world of Brahmā and thereby achieving *krama-mukti*, or gradual liberation. Finally, we hear that **Tarkadṛṣṭi**, apparently still doubtful, immerses himself in a thorough study of the *śāstras*, the eighteen branches of which are listed and individually described. He comes to the conclusion that in essence they all point to the non-dualism of the Vedānta. He confers with another guru to confirm his view and thereupon also achieves liberation-in-life.

The chapter then returns to their father, Śubhasantati, whose detachment, we are told, was insufficiently strong and who was therefore unable to renounce the world as he had planned. For such a one, Niścaldās tells us, the proper path is to practice *saguṇa-upāsanā*, or

meditation on the Lord. Śubhasantati is unsure which form of Īśvara to meditate on, and is further confused when his pandits come forward one by one with contradictory views: the pandit who speaks first proclaims the superiority of Viṣṇu, but he is reproached by a Śaiva, who is in turn dismissed by a worshipper of the Gaṇeśa, and so on by worshippers of Devī and Sūrya. Finally, Tarkadr̥ṣṭi, recently liberated and returning home, comes to his father's aid, explaining to him the key to interpreting Vyāsa's intention in the Purāṇas: the Lord beyond forms is to be meditated on; the particular forms are only for those incapable of meditation on the formless Lord. Śubhasantati next asks about the contradictions in the six philosophical systems. Tarkadr̥ṣṭi responds that Vedānta is the ultimate authority and that the other systems, to the degree that they contradict Vedānta, should be rejected. Śubhasantati is content. He practices *saguṇa-upāsanā* and on his death attains to the world of Brahmā. Tarkadr̥ṣṭi becomes king in his stead, until his *prārabdha-karma* is exhausted, at which point he sheds his body and merges with the supreme self. *The Ocean of Inquiry* then concludes with six verses describing the circumstances of its composition and two verses identifying Dādū Dayāl with Brahman.



**PART II**  
**Inquiry and Liberation**

## CHAPTER 4

### Why Epistemology Matters

*Knowledge and liberation – The puzzle of Tattvadr̥ṣṭi – An overview of Niścaldās’s epistemology – Instrumental epistemology: The basic framework – Instrumental epistemology: The idealist framework – Excursus: Jīva and Brahman – Reflections of consciousness – Material epistemology – The three guṇas – Vedāntic cosmology – On epistemic conflict*

In the first part of this dissertation, I provided an introduction to the significance of Niścaldās’s work, an account of his life, and an overview of his magnum opus, *The Ocean of Inquiry*. Here in this second part, I will offer an extended study of the theme of “inquiry” (*vicāra*) in Niścaldās’s text, with special attention to the role it plays on the path to liberation. What is inquiry? Why is it important? What does it look like in practice? Niścaldās never addresses these questions directly. As I hope to show in the following three chapters, however, that does not mean we cannot find the answers if we look carefully in the right places, reading across the text as a whole, probing assumptions and implications, and considering form as well as content. Like the cosmic milk-ocean of Hindu myth, *The Ocean of Inquiry* is vast and contains many treasures, but they are often hidden below the surface. The indulgent reader might think of this part of the dissertation as the *Vicāra-sāgara-manthanā*, “A Churning Stick for the Ocean of Inquiry.”

A study of Niścaldās’s understanding of inquiry and its role on the path to liberation will help us appreciate the close connection between philosophy and religion in his work, and in late Advaita Vedānta more broadly. My central argument is that for Niścaldās, philosophical inquiry is not a purely theoretical undertaking; under the right conditions, it can become a concrete religious practice, even *the* central practice on the path to liberation. This understanding can in turn shed light on the intellectual values of late Advaita Vedāntins, who are sometimes depicted as having been more interested in logic and metaphysics than in

soteriology; my argument is that there is no reason to separate logic and metaphysics—even excruciatingly detailed, technical explorations thereof—from soteriology, if the latter is envisioned along the lines of Niścaldās’s work. I will develop this argument across three chapters. The present chapter focuses on epistemology: what does it mean to know, and how is knowledge connected to liberation? The next chapter will focus on the path to liberation: what are the steps to liberating knowledge, and what specifically is the role of inquiry on this path? The final chapter will focus on pedagogy: what does the process of inquiry look like in practice, and what role does the guru play?

### *Knowledge and liberation*

Epistemology has always been of special interest to Indian philosophers. One reason for this was that epistemology provided a common ground for arguing about larger issues. Prior to arguing whether, for example, the self exists, or whether the Vedas or the words of the Buddha are trustworthy, it is important to consider how we can *know* any of these things in the first place. But there is also a more profound reason for the interest in epistemology: many of the classical schools held that knowledge plays a key role in the path to liberation. Buddhism, Sāṃkhya, Nyāya, and Advaita Vedānta, despite their different views of the nature and path to liberation, all agreed that liberation is ultimately achieved through knowledge. For each of these traditions, it is worth asking: what does “knowledge” mean? Is liberative knowledge comparable to familiar, everyday kinds of knowledge? Or does it belong in a class of its own—a transcendent, mystical state of insight beyond words and concepts?

If one takes the position that liberative knowledge is altogether distinct from ordinary kinds of knowledge, then epistemology might well appear irrelevant to soteriology. Niścaldās’s

position is quite different, however.<sup>245</sup> For him, there is a continuity between everyday knowledge and the knowledge of Brahman, such that by understanding how everyday knowledge works—what causes it to arise, what prevents it from arising—we can better understand the path to liberation. Niścaldās devotes a great deal of attention to epistemology in *The Ocean of Inquiry*, and we would do well to follow his lead, if we are to understand the value he places on intellectual inquiry as a means to liberation.

Niścaldās's thought is highly systematic, but oddly enough, it is not always systematically expressed. There is one extended discussion of epistemology in chapter 4 of *The Ocean of Inquiry*, which I will be drawing from heavily here; but this discussion leaves many questions unanswered, and to reconstruct Niścaldās's epistemology more systematically requires drawing from scattered and often passing references throughout the text. My method in this chapter will be to present as comprehensive as possible an account of what knowledge is, how the mind works, and what it means for knowledge to liberate according to Niścaldās. Although I have tried to present this account in a fairly polished, systematic form, I should emphasize that nowhere does Niścaldās himself give such a polished account; I have arrived at it only by asking questions that Niścaldās does not explicitly address, by probing implicit assumptions, and by weaving together passages from very different parts of the text. This chapter, therefore, should not be read as a summary or even a close reading of any one discussion from *The Ocean of Inquiry*, but rather as an *interpretation* of the epistemology underlying the text as a whole.

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<sup>245</sup> It is worth emphasizing again that my intention in this study is not to argue that Niścaldās's views are original; in fact, it is precisely the derivative nature of his text that makes it possible to read *The Ocean of Inquiry* as a window to the wider intellectual world of late Advaita Vedānta.

The interpretation for which I am arguing consists of three main parts. First, I plan to support the claim I made above, that for Niścaldās the kind of knowledge that liberates exists on a continuum with everyday kinds of knowledge. To do this, I will examine what I will be referring to as Niścaldās’s “**instrumental epistemology**,” which provides a sophisticated account of what it means to be aware of things when, on the view of Advaita Vedānta, everything is ultimately reducible to awareness. Second, I will argue that in order to appreciate the connection between knowledge and liberation in Niścaldās’s text, we need to understand not just instrumental epistemology—on which research on Indian epistemology in general has tended to focus—but also what might be termed his “**material epistemology**.” In other words, we need to understand not only *how* the mind works but also *what* the mind is. Third, I will explore his distinction between “strong” and “weak” awareness, which I argue is best understood in terms of what might be termed “**epistemic conflict**,” and which, I suggest, offers a solution to a longstanding problem in Advaita Vedānta.

### *The puzzle of Tattvadr̥ṣṭi*

Let us begin with this longstanding problem, which will help to frame this epistemological study and underscore its connection with soteriology. Chakravarthi Ram-Prasad explains:

Advaita faces the problem of explaining the difference between the merely academic knowledge of the authoritative assertions about the nature of liberation and the knowledge that is liberating. The Upaniṣads say that the self is *brahman* . . . and yet I, who have read all this, stubbornly remain R-P [Ram-Prasad], individuated, in the condition the Advaitin considers to be one of primal misunderstanding.<sup>246</sup>

This brings us back to the question with which I began: when a tradition says that knowledge liberates, what does “knowledge” mean? Is there a difference between a purely theoretical

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<sup>246</sup> 2001, p. 196.

knowledge—an “academic” knowledge, as Ram-Prasad terms it—and a deeper, experiential knowledge, the kind of knowledge that liberates?

We encounter the problem in *The Ocean of Inquiry* itself. Let us bracket, for now, the three preliminary chapters and skip to the “good part,” the story of the three brothers and their quest for liberation,<sup>247</sup> to see how the problem plays out in narrative form. As described in the synopsis in my last chapter, three brothers—Tattvadr̥ṣṭi (“Truth-seer”), Adr̥ṣṭi (“Doesn’t-get-it”), and Tarkadr̥ṣṭi (“Logic-head”)—renounce the world and take refuge with an all-wise guru. They stay with the guru for a long time, serving him humbly and patiently, until finally he agrees to teach them. Tattvadr̥ṣṭi addresses the guru:

[4.27] O blessed one, you are a storehouse of grace! You are all-knowing like Maheśa (Śiva).  
We, ignorant-minded, know nothing; [with] fear we look upon the cycle of birth etc.

[4.28] [We] have performed many *karmas* and *upāsanās*, [yet] they have [only] ensnared [us]  
further in the world.  
O Lord of gurus, tell us: by what means is the suffering of existence cut off?

[4. 29] We also desire supreme bliss; please, tell us how to find it.  
If by [your] grace, venerable one, you [can] tell [us], all will be well with us!<sup>248</sup>

As Nīścaldās’s commentary to these verses explains, Tattvadr̥ṣṭi is asking the guru to teach them the way to liberation (defined in VS chapter 1 as “the removal of suffering” [*dukh kī nivṛtti*] and “the attainment of supreme bliss” [*paramānand kī prāpti*]<sup>249</sup>). What is the means to liberation? The answer is given in the narrative verse that follows:

[4.30] Having perceived [his] disciples’ desire for liberation, the guru began to explain [to them]  
the knowledge leading thereto,  
As declared in the Vedas, [which] breaks [down] the difference between Brahman and the

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<sup>247</sup> At least a few manuscripts of chapters 1-3 seem to have circulated separately from chapters 4-7 (see Dādū 1994, p. 4), though the seven chapters were clearly intended to form a single whole: chapters 4-7 lack a *maṅgalācaraṇa*, and the opening verse to chapter 4 (p. 64) marks a transition with the word *va* (“now”): *guruśiṣa ke saṁvāda kī, kahūṁ va gāthā navīna* (“Now I will set forth a new *gāthā* [narrative poem] recounting a dialogue between a guru and [his] disciples”).

<sup>248</sup> VS p. 67.

<sup>249</sup> VS 1.26 comm., p. 17.

[individual] soul.<sup>250</sup>

Three fundamental points are concisely made here: (1) the means to liberation is knowledge; (2) the source of this knowledge is the Vedas; (2) the knowledge in question removes the erroneous perception of difference (*bhida* = *bheda*) between the individual soul and Brahman.

The *guru* tells Tattvadr̥ṣṭi:

[4.31] Know, O virtuous disciple, that the desire to attain supreme bliss  
And do away with the suffering of birth etc. is the result of error.

[4.32] Your nature is [already] supreme bliss; there is not a trace of suffering in it.  
[You are] Brahman, unborn, imperishable, [pure] consciousness; [your] heart has never known  
afflictions.<sup>251</sup>

Here the guru's speech ends; these two verses constitute the whole of his initial teaching. He is not so much a preacher as an answerer of questions: from here until the end of the chapter, his teaching emerges dialectically, in response to each new question and objection Tattvadr̥ṣṭi poses. I will return to the significance of this form in my final chapter. For now, it suffices to note that the *guru* has uttered the equivalent of a *mahāvākya*, or "Great Saying"—a Vedic sentence proclaiming the unity of the *jīva*, or individual soul, with Brahman.

Advaita Vedānta has often been viewed as a form of mysticism, aimed at the realization of a transcendent vision of non-duality, beyond the reach of words. While there is some truth to this picture, it is important not to underestimate the role that words do play for Advaitins. In fact, for Nīścaldās (as for most Advaitins) the liberating knowledge of Brahman is itself a *verbal* knowledge (*śābda-jñāna*). It comes simply from hearing the words of the Vedas, specifically, from hearing one of the Great Sayings teaching one's identity with Brahman. Note that Nīścaldās does not appeal to yogic perception or to any transcendent, mystical faculty in

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<sup>250</sup> VS p. 68.

<sup>251</sup> VS p. 68.

order to explain liberating knowledge. The means of knowledge is, in a sense, perfectly ordinary. Suppose I am looking for a chair, and someone I have no reason to doubt tells me, “There is a chair in the other room.” The words create a corresponding awareness in my mind, and assuming there is indeed a chair in the other room, the words can be said to have produced a state of knowledge. The Vedas operate the same way: the words “You are Brahman” create a corresponding awareness in the mind of the hearer; in theory, this awareness is precisely what is meant by knowledge, and it is precisely what (according to Nīścaldās) leads to liberation.

I say “in theory,” because in point of fact merely hearing the words “You are Brahman” usually does *not* lead to immediate liberation, and here we see the problem to which Chakravarthi Ram-Prasad refers. Recall that in verse 32, the guru revealed to Tattvadr̥ṣṭi that his true nature is Brahman. Nīścaldās’s commentary on this verse makes it clear that the guru has uttered the equivalent of a *mahāvākya*; he paraphrases the verse as follows: “O disciple, that Brahman which is devoid of birth and death, which has the nature of consciousness, you are that!”<sup>252</sup> So *tūṃ hai*, “you are that,” is a literal vernacular rendering of the most famous and paradigmatic *mahāvākya*, the *tat tvam asi* of the Chandogya Upanishad.

So we have an epistemological puzzle: why is Tattvadr̥ṣṭi not liberated on hearing this teaching? In a way, it is also a textual puzzle: why does the book not end here? On the theory sketched above, the guru’s words should produce in Tattvadr̥ṣṭi’s mind the awareness that he is Brahman, and this awareness should produce liberation. But it doesn’t. Tattvadr̥ṣṭi is liberated eventually—but not until the end of the chapter, after a great deal of question-and-answer, of back-and-forth with the guru, of intellectual *inquiry*. In order to understand, therefore, the role

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<sup>252</sup> VS p. 68.



of inquiry on the path to liberation, we have to begin with the puzzle of Tattvadr̥ṣṭi: why is he liberated at the end of the chapter but not at the beginning? What is the difference between his awareness “I am Brahman” at the beginning of the chapter and his awareness at the end, such that one liberates and the other does not? And how did he get from the one to the other? To solve this puzzle, we will have to do two things: first, we will have to examine Niścaldās’s epistemology in greater detail. This will be my task in the present chapter. Second, we will have to consider his description of the path to liberation, which will be my task in the next chapter.

#### *An overview of Niścaldās’s epistemology*

Niścaldās’s epistemology can be divided, somewhat artificially, into three levels. First, there is his *basic framework* for understanding how knowledge arises, a framework which draws especially from Nyāya and which is to some extent shared by other Indian philosophers. Second, there is a specifically Advaitin account of how knowledge arises when everything is understood to be, ultimately, a superimposition on pure consciousness. I will refer to this more complicated epistemological framework as Niścaldās’s *idealist framework*. Third, there are hints as to how knowledge arises not only as a result of cognitive processes but also as a result of certain “material” processes, where “material” refers not to gross, perceptible matter but to subtle material causes. I will refer to this framework as the *material framework* of Niścaldās’s epistemology, in contrast to the two preceding frameworks, which can be labeled *instrumental frameworks*. Loosely speaking, in a modern context the distinction between the instrumental frameworks and the material framework would be parallel to that of a philosophical study of consciousness as opposed to a scientific study of brain functioning.

I should emphasize that Niścaldās himself does not clearly distinguish these three frameworks in *The Ocean of Inquiry*. The basic framework and the idealist framework, in particular, are really the same unified framework for Niścaldās; I have separated them artificially for the sake of explanation. Niścaldās discusses the key terms of the basic framework only briefly, but it is essential to understand them clearly before the idealist framework can be grasped; hence, I will move from the one to the other for the sake of pedagogy, or clarity of explanation, not intending to imply that they represent separate systems.<sup>253</sup> As for the distinction between instrumental and material epistemology, it seemed to me a helpful one when I was studying *The Ocean of Inquiry*, though it is never drawn there. I was delighted later to discover that Niścaldās does indeed draw the distinction—though only in passing—in his other major work, the *Vṛtti-prabhākar*. In a discussion of the causes that lead to knowledge, Niścaldās writes:

There are two kinds of causes: material causes (*upādāna-kāraṇa*) and instrumental causes (*nimitta-kāraṇa*). [When] an effect is inseparable from its cause, [the cause] is known as a material cause. ... For example, clay is the material cause of a pot. A cause which produces an effect [but which] exists apart from the effect is known as an instrumental (or efficient) cause. For example, the potter, the wheel, and the stick are [all] instrumental causes of a pot. ... In the case of a mental transformation in the form of knowledge,<sup>254</sup> the mind (*antaḥ-kāraṇa*) is the material cause, while the instrumental cause is sense-perception or some other means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*) together with the functioning of sense-contact etc.<sup>255</sup>

Indian epistemology is sometimes referred to as *pramāṇa-sāstra*, or the science of the means of knowledge, but it seems to me that a comprehensive epistemological account would need to account both for the means of knowledge (the instrumental cause) and the substratum of

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<sup>253</sup> Although Niścaldās does not make this explanatory move himself, it accords with the spirit of his pedagogical approach in *The Ocean of Inquiry*. Often he begins with a simplified answer to a question but then goes on to say, “If one inquires into the matter [further] . . .” (*vicār karīke*), followed by a more sophisticated position.

<sup>254</sup> More literally, a *vṛtti* of the inner faculty having the form of awareness. The meaning of this phrase will become clear in the discussion that follows.

<sup>255</sup> VP 7.1, p. 196; VP 7.2, p. 206.

knowledge (the material cause). In the passage above, Niścaldās simply states that the mind is the material cause, and he does not elaborate on this point in the *Vṛtti-prabhākar*. Nor, again, does he discuss this point explicitly in *The Ocean of Inquiry*. I think it can be shown, however, that such an understanding is implicit and even necessary for a full understanding of the path to liberation, as we will see in this chapter and the next.

### *Instrumental epistemology – The basic framework*

Niścaldās’s basic epistemological framework can best be understood through its key terms: (1) awareness (*jñāna*), (2) knowledge (*pramā*), (3) means to knowledge (*pramāṇa*), (4) mind (*antaḥ-karaṇa*), (5) *vṛtti* (best left untranslated for the sake of the present discussion), and (6) form (*ākāra*).<sup>256</sup>

1. The term ***jñāna*** is cognate with Greek *gnosis* and English *knowledge*, and is indeed often translated as knowledge. When Advaitins insist that only “knowledge” leads to liberation, the term they use is *jñāna*. Technically, however, *jñāna* should be translated not as “knowledge” but as “**awareness**,” in that *jñāna* is not necessarily veridical.<sup>257</sup> Consider the Advaitins’ favorite example of mistaking a rope for a snake. Walking through a dark forest at night, one sees the rope but has a *jñāna*, or awareness, of a snake. In this case, the awareness turns out to be false (*mithyā-jñāna*). Awareness therefore does not always amount to knowledge. Note also that for most Indian philosophers, awareness is episodic: an awareness arises, and very shortly thereafter it passes. Sanskrit moreover allows us to speak of “awarenesses” in the plural, in which case one might think of *jñāna* as an “instance of

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<sup>256</sup> My discussion in this section draws mainly from Niścaldās’s treatment of the six *pramāṇas* in VS chapter 4, near the end of the guru’s dialogue with Tattvadrṣṭi.

<sup>257</sup> There is some ambiguity even in Niścaldās’s use of *jñāna*, however. For example, in distinguishing *dhyāna* and *jñāna* in VS ch. 5, he seems to treat *jñāna* as synonymous with *pramā*.

awareness.”<sup>258</sup> *Jñāna* is one of the most frequently used terms in *The Ocean of Inquiry*, appearing well over 700 times.

2. If *jñāna* is “awareness,” the term that most closely corresponds to “**knowledge**” is *pramā*. In VS chapter 4, Niścaldās defines the term as follows: “*Pramā*, or knowledge, is an awareness (*jñāna*) which is distinct from memory and which takes as its object something which is not sublated.”<sup>259</sup> The first part of this definition refers to debates among Indian philosophers as to the epistemic status of memory. If I remember something, and my memory is correct, does this count as knowledge? Niścaldās says no, and he explores the question at length; but this need not detain us here. The second part of the definition implies that knowledge is object-oriented. The object can be external (such as sense-objects) or internal (such as pleasure, pain, and notably for Niścaldās, the self); the important thing is that knowledge is always directed at an object. Indeed, Niścaldās says in the *Vṛtti-prabhākar* that knowledge always corresponds to its object (*pramā-jñān yathārth hī hovai hai*).<sup>260</sup> This correspondence is guaranteed by the stipulation that the awareness, or rather the object as originally perceived, is not sublated, which is to say the awareness is not subsequently contradicted by a different awareness. In the case of the rope mistaken for a snake, the awareness of a snake does not count as knowledge, because it is sublated (or “blocked”) by the subsequent awareness of the rope. This awareness of the rope, by contrast, is not sublated<sup>261</sup>;

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<sup>258</sup> On the relationship between awareness as such and particular instances of awareness, see the discussion of the term *vṛtti* below.

<sup>259</sup> VS 4.116 comm., p. 108.

<sup>260</sup> VP 1.1, p. 2.

<sup>261</sup> At least not at the level of everyday experience. In the VP, to avoid the problem that for Advaitins, the entire world is an illusion which is sublated when one knows Brahman, Niścaldās specifically defines a *yathārth* (“correct, corresponding to [its] object”) awareness as one whose object “is not sublated within the state of *samsāra*” (VP 1.1, p. 2).

hence it counts as knowledge and can be said to correspond to its object. Altogether, Niścaldās specifies three kinds of awareness (*jñāna*): (1) knowledge (*pramā*), or in other words correct awareness, an awareness that corresponds to its object (*yathārtha-jñāna*); (2) error (*bhrama*), which is an incorrect or “false” awareness (*mithyā-jñāna*); and (3) memory, which can be either correct or incorrect.<sup>262</sup>

3. The key question is then: how do we get knowledge? This is where the *pramāṇas* come in. As interpreted by Brahminical philosophers, ***pramāṇa*** is simply the instrument or means to *pramā*. In other words, a *pramāṇa* is a **means to knowledge**. Niścaldās writes: “The instrument (*karaṇa*) of knowledge-awareness [i.e., the kind of awareness that constitutes knowledge] is known as a *pramāṇa*, or means to knowledge” (*pramā-jñān kā jo karaṇ hai so pramāṇ kahiye hai*).<sup>263</sup> In *The Ocean of Inquiry*, Niścaldās lists and very briefly discusses the six *pramāṇas* accepted in Vedānta: perception (*pratyakṣa*), inference (*anumāna*), testimony (*śabda*), analogy (*upamāna*), presumption (*arthāpatti*), and non-apprehension (*anupalabdhi*). Each of the *pramāṇas* is examined in great detail in the *Vṛtti-prabhākar*; in *The Ocean of Inquiry*, Niścaldās is mainly interested in the role of testimony on the path to liberation. He is secondarily interested in describing sense-perception, both because it is often treated as paradigmatic of the functioning of *pramāṇas*, and also because aside from the kind of testimony that leads to liberation, it is the only other *pramāṇa* that yields direct (*pratyakṣa*, *aparokṣa*) rather than indirect (*parokṣa*) knowledge. I will return to this distinction between direct and indirect knowledge towards the end of this chapter.

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<sup>262</sup> Niścaldās’s interest in the question of memory is connected to his interest in the causes of liberation. We know that *jñāna* alone leads to liberation, but what kind of *jñāna* exactly? Not error, surely. And Niścaldās rules out memory (*smṛti*), too. That leaves only *pramā*, or knowledge, as the immediate cause of liberation.

<sup>263</sup> VS 4.116 comm., p. 108.

4. The next term, *antaḥ-karaṇa*, begins to take us from instrumental epistemology to material epistemology, though not yet in a detailed way. We have seen that the six *pramāṇas* (perception, inference, testimony, etc.) all produce *pramā*, or knowledge. Two *pramāṇas* in particular—perception and testimony—are capable of producing direct knowledge, and of these two, testimony produces the direct knowledge that leads to liberation. Now this knowledge does not arise in the testimony itself; rather, it arises in the person who hears the words “You are Brahman.” Specifically, it arises in the person’s “**inner faculty**,” or *antaḥ-karaṇa*, a wonderfully vague term that I would argue can aptly be rendered, in modern terms, by our equally vague English word “**mind**.” The *antaḥ-karaṇa*, Nīścaldās explains in chapter 5, is “‘inner,’ i.e. within the body, and it is a “faculty,” i.e. a means (*sādhana*) to awareness (*jñāna*). Hence it is called the ‘inner faculty.’”<sup>264</sup> In fact, it is not only the seat of awareness but also of desiring, willing, and feeling.<sup>265</sup> Moreover, Nīścaldās identifies the *antaḥ-karaṇa* as a “doer” and “experiencer”<sup>266</sup>—a description which in the Nyāya school would pertain to the self (*ātman*) rather than to the mind (*buddhi*). Indeed, were it not bound to cause confusion, one might even translate the Vedāntic *antaḥ-karaṇa* as “soul,” not in the sense of self (*ātman*) or vital principle (*prāṇa*), but in the classical sense of that which serves as the seat of human faculties.<sup>267</sup> I will

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<sup>264</sup> VS 5.156 comm., p. 151.

<sup>265</sup> Nīścaldās repeats an old Vedāntic explanation of the *antaḥ-karaṇa* as having four functions and four corresponding names: (1) *buddhi* (often translated as “intellect,” and used by many Vedāntins simply as a synonym for the *antaḥ-karaṇa*), which corresponds to a specific intellectual function whereby objects are ascertained as beneficial or harmful; (2) *manas* (often translated, confusingly, as “mind”), which is associated with intention and choice, hence with a volitive function; (3) *citta* (often also translated as “mind”), which is associated with thoughts, hence also with intellectual functioning; (4) *ahaṁkāra* (literally, “the I-maker,” often translated as egoism), which produces the sense of “I.” (VS 5.156 comm., p. 151)

<sup>266</sup> VS 2.12 comm., p. 41.

<sup>267</sup> Cf., e.g., the tripartite description of the soul (as possessed of a reasoning faculty, a desiring faculty, and an incisive faculty) in Plato’s *Republic*.

keep to the translation “mind,” which nicely picks up a bias in Niścaldās’s own usage toward identifying the *antaḥ-karaṇa* more specifically with its intellectual functions.

5. The next important term to consider in Niścaldās’s basic framework, and the most difficult to translate, is *vṛtti*.<sup>268</sup> We can begin by thinking of *vṛttis* as particular **instances or episodes of awareness**. Loosely speaking, every thought the mind has (or every awareness, if thought and awareness are distinguished) arises in the form of a *vṛtti*. Niścaldās defines a *vṛtti* simply as “a transformation of the mind” (*antaḥ-karaṇa kā pariṇām*).<sup>269</sup> Early in the text, in the context of arguing that the mind cannot know itself, Niścaldās explains that the mind is the *āśraya*, or locus, of its *vṛttis*; these *vṛttis* cannot take their own locus as an object any more than burning can affect fire. He also distinguishes between *vṛttis* of the mind and *dharma*s (properties) of the mind, such as pleasure and pain, which relate to the mind as property to property-possessor (*dharmin*). So *vṛttis* are not separate from the mind; rather, they are transformations that take place within the mind. In the *Vṛtti-prabhākar*, Niścaldās explains that the word *vṛtti* is often used by writers to refer to any transformation of the mind, including “pleasure, pain, desire, satisfaction, anger, patience, forbearance, non-forbearance, shame, fear, etc.,” but that it is useful to restrict the word *vṛtti* specifically to those transformations of mind (“states of mind” or “mental states,” we might say) that illuminate objects (*viṣaya kā prakāśak*).<sup>270</sup> For Niścaldās, in any particular act of knowledge, it is a *vṛtti* which bears the awareness. Indeed, he acknowledges that awareness and *vṛttis* are so closely connected that in common usage people use the word “awareness” when they really mean *vṛtti*, as when they

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<sup>268</sup> For an overview and defense of the role of *vṛttis* in Advaitic epistemology, see Grimes 1991.

<sup>269</sup> VS 4.116 comm., p. 104; VP 1.1, p. 1.

<sup>270</sup> VP 1.1, p. 1.

speak of awareness arising or perishing, when in fact it is a particular instance of awareness (a *ṛtti*) that arises or perishes.<sup>271</sup>

7. The last important term to consider in the basic framework is *ākāra*, which literally means a **form** or shape, and which refers to the content of cognition. The English word “form” is not ideal, since it tends to imply visual form, but since the same is true of the Sanskrit word, the translation is fair enough. One should keep in mind, however, that the “form” in question might well be a smell, a sound, something inferred, or even a thought such as “I am Brahman.” Now *ṛttis*, as we have seen, illuminate objects. They are said to do this by taking on the form, or *ākāra*, of the object. Objects can be internal (such as pleasure, pain, or the self) or external (such as pots, chairs, sounds, etc.). In the case of perception of external objects, a *ṛtti* of the mind is said to exit through the sense-faculty and take on the “form” of the object. Nīścaldās uses two analogies to describe this process. The first is the analogy of molten copper being cast in a mold (an analogy used by Śaṅkara in the *Upadeśasāhasrī*<sup>272</sup>):

With respect to external objects such as pots, the process is as follows: when there is contact between a sense-organ and the pot, a *ṛtti* emerging via the sense-organ attains a form (*ākāra*) similar to [that of] the pot. Just as copper cast in a mold takes on a form similar to the form of the mold, so too is the form of the mind’s *ṛtti* similar to the form of the pot.<sup>273</sup>

The second analogy is that of irrigation (an analogy used by Dharmarāja Adhvarīndra in the *Vedānta-paribhāṣā*<sup>274</sup>):

The mind sends forth a transformation [of itself] via sense-organs such as the eyes, however far away the object—a pot etc.—might be located, and then, once it reaches the object, it assumes a

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<sup>271</sup> VS 6A.9 comm., p. 199: “The word “awareness” is also used for it (the *ṛtti*), just as in common usage [people] say, “An awareness of the pot has arisen; an awareness of the cloth has been destroyed.” There, the arising or destruction of the consciousness ensconced within the *ṛtti* is not possible. It is the *ṛtti* which arises and is destroyed. (And) [people] speak of the arising or destruction of awareness. Hence the word “awareness” is used for the *ṛtti*, too.”

<sup>272</sup> *Upadeśasāhasrī* I.14.3 (Mayeda 1992, p. 136).

<sup>273</sup> VS 4.116 comm., p. 104.

<sup>274</sup> Mādhavānanda 2000, pp. 14-6.



mental form (*antaḥ-karaṇ kā ākār*) just like the form (*ākāra*) of the pot etc.<sup>275</sup> Just as the water filling a tank [used for irrigation] exits through holes, takes on the form of the long tubes, travels to a field of cultivated land, and when it reaches the field, takes on a form just like the form of the field, so too does the mind exit through the holes of the sense-organs and travel to its object. This transformation of the mind, [which travels] from the body to the object (a pot etc.) as through [irrigation] tubes, is known as *ṛtti-jñāna* (i.e. awareness as mediated by a *ṛtti*).<sup>276</sup>

Recall that knowledge (*pramā*) was defined as correct awareness, while error is incorrect awareness; the word for “correct,” *yathārtha*, again literally means “in accordance with [its] object.” Even more literally, one could describe knowledge as follows: as the object (= *yathāārtha*) is, so is the awareness. The Vedāntic theory of *ṛttis* taking on the forms of objects can thus be understood as an attempt to explain the process through which the correspondence between object and awareness is established.

#### *Instrumental epistemology: The idealist framework*

So far so good: we have a basic framework which explains the everyday functioning of cognition. Now we turn to the higher framework, which is considerably more complicated. The need for this higher framework arises from the fact that Advaita Vedānta is not realist but idealist in its metaphysics. Whereas the basic framework described above suffices to explain the arising of knowledge insofar as we take things like pots and minds to be real, independent objects, it falls short of explaining how knowledge arises if, in fact, everything is ultimately consciousness. Let us begin, then, by introducing an additional term to the discussion, a term which is essential for understanding the metaphysics as well as the higher epistemology of Advaita Vedānta.

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<sup>275</sup> As Nīścaldās explains later in the same passage (p. 114), once the *ṛtti* reaches the object, its final, *ākāra*-bearing state is known as *pramā*, or knowledge, while all of its states leading up to that (from its exit through the eyes etc. up until it reaches the object) are known as *pramāṇa*, or means to knowledge.

<sup>276</sup> VS 4.116 comm., p. 110.

This key term is *cit*, or **consciousness**. Synonyms of *cit* include *cetanā* and *saṃvit*. From an everyday point of view, one might begin by noting that there are fundamentally two kinds of things in the world: conscious things and unconscious things. In the thought-world of Indian philosophy, consciousness is explained in terms of luminosity or illumination. Thus, a conscious thing is one which illuminates (*prakāśaka*) unconscious things, while unconscious things are those which are illuminated (*prakāśya*). For Advaitins, consciousness (even in its everyday manifestations) is self-luminous, i.e. it is revealed through its own luminosity (just as the sun is visible through its own light) and does not require anything to illuminate it (just as the sun does not require a lamp to illuminate it). Moving from an everyday to a metaphysical point of view, Advaita Vedānta teaches that consciousness is single and undivided. That is to say, there are not really numerous conscious things in the world; there is only consciousness. What is more, only consciousness is real. While there are innumerable unconscious objects, these objects as such are not real, but are illusions superimposed on consciousness.

The Vedāntic doctrine of the oneness of consciousness leads to an epistemological problem: how does one explain apparently multiple instances of consciousness? This is precisely where the theory of *ṛttis* comes in. Consciousness as such is one, Advaitins maintain; it is the *ṛttis*—the particular, empirical instances of cognition—that are multiple. Loosely speaking (we will come to a more precise articulation of this position shortly), the *ṛttis* are bearers of consciousness; consciousness, as Nīścaldās often writes, is “ensconced” in *ṛttis*. Since *ṛttis* are simply transformations of the mind, this of course means that the mind, too, is a bearer of consciousness, or that consciousness is ensconced within the mind. Note the startling implication: the mind itself is technically not conscious. This is important for Advaitins to maintain, because for Advaita Vedānta, *everything* apart from the self—including

not just the body and external objects but even the mind itself—is non-conscious and unreal. Were the mind accepted as real, one would be led to accept multiplicity, since one must posit multiple minds in order to explain the privacy and uniqueness of individual experience.

The crux of this epistemological problem then becomes: what exactly does it mean to say that consciousness is “ensconced” within the mind and its *ṛttis*? How does the arising of a non-conscious *ṛtti* communicate conscious awareness? Note that the word “awareness,” like the word *ṛtti*, occupies a kind of middle ground between pure, undivided consciousness and non-conscious things. As I mentioned above, Nīścaldās acknowledges that people sometimes use the term *ṛtti* loosely to refer to awareness, though strictly speaking a *ṛtti* is distinct from the awareness it transmits. Similarly, he acknowledges that the term *jñāna* is sometimes used loosely to refer to specific instances of awareness, but he points out that strictly speaking *jñāna* is synonymous with *cit*, or pure, eternal consciousness. “Arising and perishing pertain to the mind’s *ṛttis*,” he says, “not to awareness.”<sup>277</sup>

The question of how pure consciousness relates to particular instances of awareness is precisely what the higher epistemological framework seeks to answer. This question is in many ways parallel to one of the central and abiding questions within Advaita Vedānta: what is the relationship between Brahman and individual beings (*jīvas*)? In *The Ocean of Inquiry*, Nīścaldās paves the way to a discussion of epistemology by first discussing different ways of envisioning the relationship between Brahman and the *jīva*, and this discussion is worth considering if we wish to understand his epistemology. Not only will it help us to understand

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<sup>277</sup> VS 6B.9a comm., p. 225. As Nīścaldās explains in the same passage, awareness/consciousness is in turn the essence of the self: “The self is consciousness (*cit*). ... The self never exists apart from awareness (*jñāna*); hence awareness is the nature of the self. For example, fire never exists apart from heat; hence heat is the nature of fire. Likewise, awareness is the nature of the self. ... Thus the self has the form of awareness, the illuminator of all. Hence it is consciousness.”

the role of *vṛttis* as a mediator between consciousness and non-conscious things, it will help to demonstrate the unity behind Niścaldās's thought; as I hope will be clear by the end of this chapter, epistemology, metaphysics, soteriology, and cosmology are all closely bound up for Niścaldās.

#### *Excursus: Jīva and Brahman*

The term *jīva* (which comes from a verbal root meaning “to live”) refers to living, embodied beings such as humans, *devas* (“gods”), and animals. According to the view commonly accepted across schools of Indian thought, the *jīva* is a *saṃsārin*, or transmigrator: in different lives the *jīva* takes on different bodies, being born again and again. The goal of liberation is deliverance from *saṃsāra*, or the cycle of rebirths. For Advaita Vedānta, *saṃsāra* is not real; it is in fact an error, arising from the false superimposition of unreal things on the one, non-transmigrating self. The *jīva*, or individual soul, is in truth identical to Brahman, the one, all-pervasive, unchanging reality. This, at any rate, is the view of those who have achieved liberation. But for those still seeking liberation—those for whom the *jīva* appears to be different from Brahman—how is one to understand the relationship between the *jīva* and Brahman?

Śaṅkara does not answer the question definitively, and later Advaitins developed different ways of explaining the relationship, based on different analogies. According to Niścaldās's view of the tradition, there arose three main positions: the doctrine of delimitation (*avaccheda-vāda*), articulated by Vācaspati Miśra in his *Bhāmatī* on Śaṅkara's *Brahma-sūtra-bhāṣya*; the doctrine of reflection (*pratibimba-vāda*), articulated by Prakāśātman in his *Vivaraṇa* on the same text; and the doctrine of semblance (*ābhāsa-vāda*), which is associated especially with Sureśvara, though Niścaldās traces it to Śaṅkara. Niścaldās also discusses a fourth position, which he declares to be the highest position: a pure idealism known as the doctrine of

creation-as-perception (*dr̥ṣṭi-sr̥ṣṭi-vāda*), associated with the *Yoga-vāsiṣṭha* and expounded by Prakāśānanda and Madhusūdana Sarasvatī. This fourth position is discussed separately by Nīścaldās, and while it is extremely important for understanding developments within late Advaita Vedānta, it does not bear directly on the puzzle of Tattvadr̥ṣṭi's liberation and so will not be treated here.

Nīścaldās stresses that all three (or four) doctrines are legitimate expressions of Vedānta. He writes: "Since *all* of the [various] approaches (*prakriyā*) to Vedānta are for the sake of causing one to know the non-dual self, whichever approach gives rise to realization for the seeker of knowledge, that very [approach] is correct (*samīcīna*) for him."<sup>278</sup> He goes on to say, however, that the doctrine of semblance (*ābhāsa-vāda*) is chief (*mukhya*) among them (here he is speaking only of the three doctrines, not of *dr̥ṣṭi-sr̥ṣṭi-vāda*), since this is the doctrine that Śaṅkara himself adopts in his *Vākya-vṛtti* and *Upadeśa-sāhasrī*.<sup>279</sup> I will therefore explain the higher epistemological framework with special reference to the doctrine of semblance. But for the sake of contrast, I should first briefly describe the other two doctrines.

Once again, we need to begin with some key terms. The first is **superimposition**, or *adhyāsa*. In the case of a rope mistaken for a snake, the snake is said to have been *superimposed* on the rope. Similarly, when one sees a piece of mother-of-pearl glistening in the distance and mistakes it for a piece of silver, this is also a case of superimposition, a false awareness of silver having been superimposed on the mother-of-pearl. So, too, Vedāntins say, various things in the world are falsely superimposed on the self, which is really distinct from them. Both the false awareness and the illusory object (which are ultimately the same, since

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<sup>278</sup> VS 6B.42 comm., p. 275.

<sup>279</sup> VS 6B.42 comm., p. 275.

the object is not real) can be referred to as superimposition, according to Niścaldās's definition: "Superimposition refers to erroneous awareness and its false object."<sup>280</sup>

That upon which something has been superimposed is known as the **substratum** (*āśraya*), while the thing superimposed is known as an **overlay** (*upādhi*).<sup>281</sup> Niścaldās defines an overlay as follows: "When an object exists somewhere, that which is put in the same location and is taken for the object, though it is distinct from it, is called an overlay."<sup>282</sup> While the properties (*dharma*) of an object inhere in the object and thus pertain to its nature, overlays remain separate. For example, a rose possesses redness as a property; the flower really is red. If one places a crystal beside the rose, the crystal will also appear red, but there the redness is an overlay and not a property.

A thorough discussion of superimposition—which Niścaldās examines at great length—is beyond the scope of this chapter. Suffice to say that Advaitins appeal to a theory of "ineffability" (*anirvacanīya-khyāti*) to refer to superimposition as neither existent nor non-existent: although not non-existent, since it is perceived, a superimposition is nonetheless not "real" or "true" (*satya*), since it can be sublated by a subsequent correct awareness.

Ultimately, only consciousness is real, but from a less than ultimate perspective, one can speak of consciousness as a substratum for various illusory superimpositions. The body, the sense-organs, and even the mind all constitute overlays on pure consciousness, as do external objects. Consciousness on its own, in ultimate reality, simply is what it is, namely pure consciousness. But when one provisionally acknowledges the overlays as if they were real, one

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<sup>280</sup> VS 2.6 comm., p. 25.

<sup>281</sup> The term *upādhi* derives from the verbal root *upa + ā + dhā*, which means to lay or place on top of; *adhyāsa* comes from a different verbal root but means basically the same thing: *adhi + as* = to set above, to lay on top. *Upādhi* is sometimes translated into English as "limiting adjunct," but I prefer the less jargony "overlay."

<sup>282</sup> VS 2.12 comm., p. 41.

can meaningfully speak of consciousness as overlaid by, say, the mind. Here is where things become a bit complicated. The combination of mind and consciousness, or more precisely, consciousness as overlaid by the mind (i.e. pure consciousness with an individual mind illusorily superimposed on it), is designated as “the **Witness**” (*sākṣī*), or witnessing consciousness, since it is that within the mind which is the perceiver behind every act of perception. “The Witness” in its ultimate reality is none other than Brahman, or pure consciousness; this pure consciousness only becomes a witness of particular objects and episodes of cognition in conjunction with the mind. As Nīścaldās writes: “With respect to consciousness, the designation ‘Witness’ and the function of illumination on the part of the mind are apparent from the perspective of the mind as an overlay. Without the mind as an overlay, the designation ‘Witness’ and the function of illumination on the part of the inner faculty together with its properties will not be apparent.”<sup>283</sup> The designation “Witness” thus serves as a bridge between oneness and multiplicity. Consciousness is one, while minds are many. But when the mind is superimposed on consciousness, one speaks of that consciousness as the Witness, the illuminator of the individual episodes of awareness that take place within the mind. Loosely speaking—since the mind does not really exist—one might thus think of consciousness as shining “through” individual minds.

The three doctrines of delimitation, reflection, and semblance are all ways of explaining this mediating relationship between pure consciousness and our actual day-to-day experience of multiplicity and difference. All three doctrines agree that only consciousness is real, and that everything superimposed on consciousness is an illusion. They also agree that the *jīva*, or individual soul, represents a particular constellation or relationship between pure

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<sup>283</sup> VS 2.12 comm., p. 42.

consciousness and superimposed overlays. But they disagree on the exact nature of this relationship. Upholders of the doctrine of delimitation say the *jīva* can be described simply as pure consciousness directly qualified, or rather delimited, by the individual mind. Upholders of the doctrines of reflection and semblance believe this picture is too simplistic; instead, they teach a third, mediating reality, namely a reflection (*pratibimba*) or semblance (*ābhāsa*) of consciousness, which is not exactly the same as pure consciousness, but which is not the same thing as the mind either. According to these doctrines, the *jīva* consists of three aspects: pure consciousness, the mind, and a reflection or semblance of consciousness within the mind. The difference between the doctrine of reflection and semblance is slight, according to Nīścaldās: it hinges on whether a reflection is seen to be identical or different from the thing it reflects. When light shines in a mirror, is the reflected light the same as the original light, or is it different? When a face is reflected in a mirror, is it the same as the original face, or is it different? Upholders of the doctrine of reflection—a doctrine associated especially with the *Vivaraṇa* commentary of Prakāśātman—emphasize the continuity and identity between the reflection (*pratibimba*) and its prototype (*bimba*). Upholders of the doctrine of semblance—associated especially with Sureśvara (and later Vidyāraṇya)—emphasize discontinuity and difference, preferring to speak of a shadow or phantom image (*chāyā*) rather than a reflection (*pratibimba*).<sup>284</sup> Nonetheless, despite the negative connotations of *ābhāsa* (as in *hetvābhāsa*, *rasābhāsa*, etc.), functionally the semblance of consciousness (*ābhāsa* being an abbreviation of *cidābhāsa*) fulfills exactly the same role as a reflection of consciousness. Nīścaldās gives the

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<sup>284</sup> See VS 6B.42 comm., p. 273: “This is the difference between an appearance (*ābhāsa*) and a reflection (*pratibimba*): in the position of *ābhāsa*, the appearance is false, and in the position of *pratibimba*, the reflection is not false; rather, it is true. Why? The established position of the proponents of reflection is as follows: the reflection (*pratibimba*) which [appears] in a mirror is not a phantom image (*chāyā*) of the face. ... In this way, since the reflection is true by nature, it is known as true. [Whereas] the nature of *ābhāsa*, [on the other hand,] is regarded as a phantom image (*chāyā*); hence it is false. This is the difference between the doctrine of *ābhāsa* (‘appearance’) and the doctrine of reflection.”



following definition: “A **semblance** (*ābhāsa*) is a name for the shining forth of the Immutable (*kūṭastha*),” where “the Immutable” is a synonym of “the Witness,” referring to the pure consciousness of Brahman insofar as it is the substratum of individual minds.<sup>285</sup>

The difference between the doctrine of delimitation and the doctrine of semblance, as Niścaldās explains them, is quite simple: “In the doctrine of semblance, the mind contains a semblance (*ābhāsa*) [of consciousness], whereas in the doctrine of delimitation it does not.”<sup>286</sup> In other words, in the doctrine of delimitation, the *jīva* can be defined simply as consciousness qualified by the individual mind, as stated above. In the doctrine of semblance, the definition is a little more complicated: the individual soul is consciousness qualified by the individual mind together with a semblance of consciousness. This doctrine will become clearer when we come to the discussion of material epistemology a little later. For now, one can keep in mind the analogy of a mirror. For the doctrine of semblance, the mind is like a mirror, and the semblance of consciousness is like a reflection of light therein. The *jīva*, on this analogy, is the mirror together with both the original light and its reflection.

Why is it necessary to complicate Advaitic epistemology with this notion of a semblance of consciousness? After all, Indian thinkers accepted a version of Ockham’s razor, seeing *gurutva*, or “heaviness” (in the sense of unnecessary complexity), as a fault. Why does the rather complicated doctrine of semblance not fall under this razor? For Niścaldās (as for other Advaitins) it is because of the demands of idealism, or the teaching that everything is ultimately consciousness. For non-Advaitins, the distinction between consciousness and non-conscious things, or between knowledge and objects of knowledge, is relatively

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<sup>285</sup> VS 4.85 comm., p. 92.

<sup>286</sup> VS 4.116 comm., p. 113.

straightforward. For Advaitins, however, both have consciousness as their substratum. Or rather, as Nīścaldās writes, there are in fact four kinds of consciousness implicated in every act of knowledge: (1) the consciousness of the knower, (2) the consciousness of the means of knowledge, (3) the consciousness of the knowledge, and (4) the consciousness of the known object (*jñeya-cetanā*, *viṣaya-cetanā*).<sup>287</sup>

On the doctrine of delimitation, the problem arises: if the *jīva* is simply consciousness qualified by the mind, then, since the mind is a non-conscious thing, why are pots not luminous with awareness, too, just like the mind? After all, the pot also has consciousness as its substratum; it is consciousness-qualified-by-a-pot. The doctrine of semblance solves the problem by introducing a mediating term, namely the semblance. A mind is non-conscious, but it possesses a semblance of consciousness and therefore is luminous with awareness and is a knower. A pot, by contrast, does not have a semblance of consciousness within it and is therefore not luminous; it stands in need of illumination and hence is an object of knowledge. In short, while for realists the fundamental distinction is between conscious and non-conscious things, for Nīścaldās and other Advaitins who accept the doctrine of semblance, the fundamental distinction is between non-conscious things that nonetheless reflect pure consciousness, and non-conscious things that do not.<sup>288</sup>

Nīścaldās himself makes it clear that the doctrine of semblance is superior to the doctrine of delimitation, explaining that there must be two kinds of light within the mind: the

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<sup>287</sup> VS 4.116 comm., p. 114.

<sup>288</sup> To be more precise: the fundamental difference is between consciousness as overlaid by non-conscious objects possessing a semblance of consciousness (viz., minds and their *ṛttis*) and consciousness as overlaid by non-conscious objects not possessing a semblance of consciousness (e.g., pots).

pervasive light of pure consciousness (over which the mind is superimposed), and the light of the semblance of consciousness (contained within the mind). He argues:

The light of pervasive consciousness is [also] in the body etc. and pots etc., [but] the light of the semblance is not. Hence only consciousness as qualified by the mind—which possesses both kinds of light—is referred to as a knower. The consciousness associated with the pot etc., which possess [just the] one [kind of] light, is not a knower. In the view of those who do not [speak of] a semblance [of consciousness] in the mind, as with the pot etc., there is also not this other [kind of] light, pertaining to the semblance, in the mind. The one light, [that of] pervasive consciousness, in the mind is [the same as] the light of pervasive consciousness in the pot etc. Hence, [whether it is] qualified by a pot or by the body, the consciousness qualified in this way, like the consciousness qualified by the mind, should be a knower. ... In this way, the doctrine of reflection proves to be superior (*uttama*), not the doctrine of delimitation.<sup>289</sup>

Both minds and pots have consciousness as their ultimate nature, yet pots are not knowers while minds are. It follows that there must be something aside from consciousness that distinguishes minds from pots. That distinguishing factor, according to Nīścaldās, is a kind of individualized consciousness, a semblance of pure consciousness (*cidābhāsa*) reflected within the individual mind. In a word, the doctrine of semblance is necessary to explain why it is that I am able to know things like pots, while pots remain ignorant of me.

### *Reflections of consciousness*

Let us return now to the functioning of *vr̥ttis* to see how they work in this higher framework, when the *vr̥tti* is not simply a transformation of mind, but a transformation of mind possessed of a special kind of light known as a semblance of consciousness. Recall that in the basic framework, the purpose of a *vr̥tti* was to take on a form (*ākāra*) corresponding to the form of an object of knowledge. In fact, this is not its ultimate purpose. In the higher framework, the real purpose of a *vr̥tti*—a purpose it fulfills via taking on the form of the object—is to remove the ignorance veiling the object. Here it is worth pausing briefly to consider yet another important term in the system, namely **ignorance**, or *avidyā*. As has often been noted, in post-Śaṅkara

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<sup>289</sup> VS 4.116 comm., pp. 113-4.

Vedānta ignorance came to be interpreted as having a kind of positive existence. Ignorance is not ultimately real in the way that consciousness is, and it would be a mistake to see them as locked in a Manichean struggle. Nonetheless, ignorance (*avidyā*) is not simply the absence of knowledge (*vidyā*), as Nyāya would have it. For post-Śaṅkara Advaitins, ignorance is synonymous with *Māyā*, the mysterious, beginningless source of the illusory world around us and within us. As we shall see shortly, it is also synonymous with *prakṛti*, the “material” principle underlying the world (where “material” includes not just gross matter but also subtle, invisible matter, up to and including the mind). For Advaitins such as Niścaldās, this ignorance cannot be a mere privation, for the simple reason that it *does* things. Specifically, it is said to have two functions: first, the function of projecting things (*vikṣepa-śakti*, i.e. the power of projecting illusions), and second, the function of concealing things (*āvaraṇa-śakti*, i.e. the power of covering up or concealing). According to Niścaldās, whenever an object such as a pot exists, it is because the object is being projected through the power of *Māyā*. And whenever the object is unknown (i.e., whenever it is not an object of awareness), it is because the object is being concealed by a “portion” of *Māyā* (Niścaldās’s term is *avidyā-aṃśa*). The act of knowing the object likewise involves a twofold process. First, the *ākāra*-bearing *ṛtti* removes the portion of *Māyā* concealing the object. Once the object is no longer concealed, the semblance (*ābhāsa*) of consciousness within the *ṛtti* then illumines the object.

In the unique and most important case of knowledge of the self (which is the cause of liberation), only the first part of the process is necessary, because once the veil of ignorance is removed, the self will shine forth of itself; no external illumination is necessary, just as one does not need to shine a flashlight on a flame in order to see it. However, if the flame has been covered up, the covering needs to be removed before the flame can shine. This analogy helps

to explain what it means to “know” Brahman, when strictly speaking Brahman is beyond the duality of subject and object and therefore cannot be an object of knowledge. At the moment of liberation, a *vṛtti* having the form “I am Brahman” removes the veil of ignorance concealing one’s true nature, and that nature then shines forth with its own light, without needing to be illumined by the semblance of consciousness within the *vṛtti*.

To return to the mundane realm of pots, Nīścaldās explains the role of the semblance of consciousness with the example of, well, a pot:

[Consider] a vessel of iron or clay covered up by [an overturned] *kūṇḍā*, or tub, sitting in a dark [room]. Even if one shatters the tub with a stick, without bringing a lamp to it, the vessel will not be illumined, even though it is uncovered. But with a lamp, it will be illumined/revealed. Similarly, the *vṛtti* penetrates the covering of the pot, which is covered by ignorance. Nevertheless, the pot is not revealed. Why? The pot is non-conscious by nature, as is the *vṛtti*. Its purpose is simply to penetrate the covering. Illumination does not arise from it. Hence the semblance [of consciousness] is what illumines the pot.<sup>290</sup>

Although Nīścaldās does not draw the connection explicitly, it seems that this twofold operation of knowledge corresponds, inversely, to the twofold operation of ignorance, which both projects and conceals. The apparent existence of non-conscious things like pots in the first place is a case of the projecting power of *Māyā* or ignorance, and the pot is additionally concealed by a portion of ignorance. Because ignorance has worked in two ways, the process of knowledge must act in two ways, too, first by removing the veil of ignorance and then by illumining the pot.

After establishing the superiority of the doctrine of semblance, Nīścaldās goes on to discuss the appropriateness of the word “awareness” (*jñāna*) in the light of his higher epistemological framework. Again, technically speaking awareness and pure consciousness are synonymous. Thus, for the doctrine of semblance, the awareness which exists within a *vṛtti* is a semblance of consciousness; hence it is not really awareness, strictly speaking, but a false

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<sup>290</sup> VS 4.116 comm., p. 106.

reflection thereof. Nonetheless, because this semblance takes on a form (*ākāra*) like its object, and because the semblance of consciousness still has an illuminating function, conventionally we speak of it as a means to knowledge. Or to be more precise, the three together (consciousness, the *vr̥tti* that overlays consciousness, and the semblance of consciousness reflected within the *vr̥tti*) constitute a means to knowledge.

Significantly, in this discussion of *vyavahāra*, or everyday ways of speaking, Nīścaldās clarifies that the terms *pramāṇa* and *pramā*, which I have been translating as means of knowledge and knowledge, *only* apply to the level of everyday experience, not to ultimate reality. In Nīścaldās’s words, “even though consciousness is eternal by nature, and the sense-organs cannot produce the awareness (*jñāna*) involved in knowledge (*pramā*) ... nevertheless, talk of ‘knowledge’ (*pramā-vyavahāra*) does not refer to non-overlaid [i.e. pure] consciousness; rather, one speaks of knowledge as overlaid by a form-bearing *vr̥tti*.”<sup>291</sup> This point is extremely important for understanding the relationship of knowledge and liberation in Nīścaldās’s thought. Strictly speaking, there can be no “knowledge” of Brahman, insofar as the process of knowledge is by definition object-oriented and presupposes distinctions (between knower, knowledge, and known) that do not apply in the case of pure consciousness. Strange as it might sound, the knowledge that liberates Tattvadr̥ṣṭi at the end of VS chapter 4 is not really the knowledge of Brahman. Rather, it is a particular *vr̥tti*—a single, transient “thought”—that simply removes a particular veil of ignorance and then passes away.

### *Material epistemology*

We may now turn to Nīścaldās’s material epistemology, which has been hinted at already, and necessarily so, since the very division between material and instrumental epistemology is

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<sup>291</sup> VS 4.116 comm., p. 114.

conceptual: in real acts of knowing the material cause and the instrumental cause are both involved. Now the material basis of all acts of knowing is the mind, and it should come as no surprise by now that the mind is “material,” insofar as it is distinct from pure consciousness. Recall Niścaldās’s words from the *Vṛtti-prabhākar*, cited above: “In the case of a mental transformation in the form of knowledge, the mind is the material cause, while the instrumental cause is sense-perception or some other means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*) together with the functioning of sense-contact etc.” Niścaldās does not explain further in this passage what it means for the mind to be a material cause. In order to understand the nature of the mind’s “materiality,” we have to turn to a rather surprising source: Niścaldās’s account of the creation of the universe in VS chapter 5, which the guru uses as a means of teaching Adṛṣṭi, Tattvadrṣṭi’s less intellectually inclined younger brother. This is a surprising place to look for epistemological answers because the context is not epistemology at all; what is more, Niścaldās himself is dismissive of this cosmological material, which he sees as useful only for lower-level students (like Adṛṣṭi). Nonetheless, cosmology turns out to be extremely helpful for understanding Niścaldās’s epistemology. This, at any rate, is the argument I wish to make here. To my knowledge, scholarly treatments of epistemology in Advaita Vedānta have so far neglected the cosmological connections I am about to suggest.<sup>292</sup>

### *The three guṇas*

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<sup>292</sup> See, e.g., Mishra (1990), Gupta (1991), Ram-Prasad (2002), and Timalisina (2008), all of whom focus on what I have termed “instrumental epistemology” (as well the *jīva* theories discussed above), without discussing the material make-up of the mind, the relevance of *guṇa*-theory, or the broader epistemological-cosmological connections I hope to suggest. I should mention that although Niścaldās’s text, as a compendium bringing together a wide array of Vedāntic teachings, makes it easier to identify these connections, they can be found in earlier Vedāntic texts as well (see, e.g., Vidyāraṇya’s *Pañcadaśī*). I suspect that the method I have adopted here—of not restricting myself to explicit discussions of epistemology, but reading more freely and looking for clues in unexpected places—might well be applied fruitfully to other texts and authors to open up new avenues of research, or at least new ways of thinking about the received categories, questions, and terms of debate in Indian philosophical thought.

Niścaldās’s “material epistemology,” as I am calling it, hinges on the notion of the three *guṇas*, or qualities: *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*. The three *guṇas* are usually said to have originated in the Sāṃkhya system, and this is correct as a matter of ancient history, but it is worth noting that already by the age of classical Hinduism, the theory of the *guṇas* had become widely accepted outside of the school of Sāṃkhya narrowly understood. When Vedāntic thinkers after the time of Śaṅkara attempted to provide a systematic cosmology, they made free use of terms and concepts originally derived from Sāṃkhya.

Classical Sāṃkhya, as set forth in the *Sāṃkhya-kārikās* (SK) of Īśvara Kṛṣṇa,<sup>293</sup> makes a fundamental distinction between *puruṣa* (cf. “spirit”) and *prakṛti* (cf. “prime matter,” also known as *avyakta*, “the unmanifest” [as opposed to the full range of manifestation which proceeds from it], and *pradhāna*, “the primordial” or “chief”). *Prakṛti* and everything that derives from it (which includes everything in existence apart from the many *puruṣas*) possess three fundamental qualities, the three *guṇas*. These three qualities, though conceptually distinguishable, never exist in a pure state; their functioning is in every case “mutually dominating, supporting, productive, and cooperative.”<sup>294</sup> *Sattva* by nature is light (*laghu*) and luminous (*prakāśa*), *rajas* is active (*upaśāmbhaka*) and restless (*cala*), and *tamas* is heavy (*guru*) and obscuring (*varaṇaka*).<sup>295</sup> Much could be said about the mutual operation of the *guṇas*, which have application in fields ranging from cosmology, physics, Ayurveda, ethics, and so on. Here we will focus specifically on their application to epistemology.

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<sup>293</sup> Niścaldās himself claims to have studied Sāṃkhya thoroughly (VS 7.111, p. 327), and this text would have almost certainly been one he knew.

<sup>294</sup> *anyonyābhibhavāśrayajanānamithunavṛttayaś ca guṇāḥ*, SK 12b, trans. Virupakshananda (p. 42).

<sup>295</sup> *sattvaṃ laghu prakāśakam iṣṭam upaśāmbhakam calaṃ ca rajaḥ / guru varaṇakam eva tamaḥ ...* // SK 13, trans. mine, text per Virupakshananda (p. 45). SK 12 offers a different characterization, associating the three *guṇas* with pleasure, pain, and delusion respectively, as well as with the functions of illumining, inciting, and restraining (*prītyapṛītiṣādātmakāḥ prakāśapṛavṛttiniyamārthāḥ*); cf. Virupakshananda, p. 42.



Already in classical Sāṃkhya, *sattva* was associated with knowledge. As I mentioned earlier, Indian epistemology more broadly has been deeply influenced by the semantic association of knowledge with light, or *prakāśa*. To know an object, according to a common idiom, is to illuminate or shed light on the object. Where in English we might say that something is perceived, or appears, in Sanskrit it is common to say that the object “shines forth” (*bhāti, avabhāṣate*) or “is illumined” (*prakāśyate*). The fundamental difference between conscious and non-conscious things is often explained in terms of “light”: knowers are *prakāśaka*, or “illuminators,” while objects of knowledge are *jaḍa*, or “inert” and by implication non-luminous. Note then, that in the Sāṃkhya system, when *sattva* is described as “luminous” and is associated with the function of illumination, it is associated with knowledge. By contrast, the quality of *tamas* is connected with ignorance; indeed, one of the literal meanings of the word *tamas* is darkness, and it can also be used to mean ignorance. In the section of the SK describing *buddhi*, or “intellect,” we are told that when the intellect is *sāttvika* (i.e., when the quality of *sattva* predominates and is not overwhelmed by *rajas* or *tamas*), it is characterized by (1) merit (*dharma*), (2) awareness (*jñāna*), (3) dispassion (*virāga*), and (4) lordly power (*aiśvarya*).<sup>296</sup> When the intellect is *tāmasa*, or dominated by *tamas*, it is characterized by the opposite qualities. Hence, the predominance of *sattva* is associated with awareness (*jñāna*), and the predominance of *tamas* is associated with ignorance (*a-jñāna, avidyā*). Finally, it is worth noting that in classical Sāṃkhya, the various sense-organs (which are the means to sense-awareness) are said to be *sāttvika*, while the five elements (ether, air, fire, water, and earth) are said to be *tāmasa*.

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<sup>296</sup> *adhyavasāyo buddhir dharmo jñānaṃ virāga aiśvarya / sāttvikam etadrūpaṃ tāmasam asmād viparyastam //* SK 23 (trans. adapted from Virupakshananda, p. 66).

Niścaldās is heir to a tradition of Vedāntic cosmology that largely accepts the foregoing account. For Niścaldās, the three *guṇas* are so well known that he discusses them first and only defines them later. These definitions (or perhaps simply descriptions) bring out the epistemological role of the *guṇas*. This is especially clear in his definition of *sattva*: “Awareness arises through the quality of *sattva*,” Niścaldās writes,<sup>297</sup> and he repeats this formulation several times throughout the text. On one occasion he even describes it as a *niyama*, or rule: “Awareness arises through the quality of *sattva*; this is a rule.”<sup>298</sup> He also writes that “the quality of *sattva* is luminous by nature,” and in a section describing the transcendent world of Brahmā, he writes: “There, there is only the quality of *sattva*. Hence what predominates in that world is light in the form of knowledge, which is the product of the quality of *sattva*.”<sup>299</sup> The equation is clear: light = knowledge = a product of *sattva*.

While *sattva* is associated with knowledge and light, *tamas* is associated with the opposite: ignorance and darkness. In a verse from the dialogue with Tattvadrṣṭi, Niścaldās plays on both meanings:

[4.63] Not through *karma* and *upasānā* is *tamas*, the cause of the world, destroyed.  
In a house, darkness is not removed without a light.<sup>300</sup>

The commentary glosses *tam(as)* as “ignorance” (*avidyā*), the material cause (*upādāna-kāraṇa*) of the world. Just as only light can remove darkness, only knowledge can remove ignorance. Epistemologically, one could say that the dark veil of *tamas* can only be removed by a *vṛtti* pertaining to *sattva*. Niścaldās specifically defines the quality of *tamas* as “having an

<sup>297</sup> VS 4.89 comm., p. 94. –A similar formulation appears in the *Bhagavad-gītā* (14.17), as Bhuvaneshwari notes (2010, p. 211).

<sup>298</sup> VS 6B.9a comm., p. 226.

<sup>299</sup> VS 4.89 comm., p. 94; VS 5.168 comm., p. 180.

<sup>300</sup> VS p. 85.

obscuring/veiling (*āvaraṇa*) nature.”<sup>301</sup> Elsewhere, in his discussion of the world of Brahmā, he says that *tamas* is absent from that world, and that inertness (lack of consciousness) is therefore not found there.<sup>302</sup>

Finally there is the quality of *rajas*, which Niścaldās defines as “having the nature of projection/scattering (*vikṣepa*).”<sup>303</sup> Activity (*pravṛtti*) is a product of *rajas*, he explains, and in his discussion of the world of Brahmā, he says that *rajas*, like *tamas*, is absent from that world; “hence there is not *vikṣepa* in the form of lust, anger, etc.”<sup>304</sup>

Bringing together Niścaldās’s definitions of the three *guṇas*, we have the following:

**sattva:** “The quality of *sattva* is of a luminous (*prakāśa*) nature.”

**rajas:** “The quality of *rajas* is of a projecting (*vikṣepa*) nature.”

**tamas:** “The quality of *tamas* is of an obscuring (*āvaraṇa*) nature.”

What is fascinating is that when we line the three definitions up in this way, an undeniable parallel emerges. Niścaldās never makes this point explicit, but it seems clear that the distinction between the Real (*brahman*) and the unreal (*māyā*) is mirrored or projected within the unreal itself. How so? The Real, *brahman*, is of the nature of pure consciousness, which is self-luminous. (“Blissful, eternal, luminous, pervasive,” Niścaldās describes the self in the opening verse of *The Ocean of Inquiry*.) Now recall that the unreal (*māyā*) has two functions or powers: projection (*vikṣepa-śakti*) and obscuration (*āvaraṇa-śakti*). These are exactly the words used above to describe the natures of *rajas* and *tamas*, respectively. Thus, although the three *guṇas* belong entirely to the realm of *Māyā*—as will be made clear in the cosmogony described below—they mirror the fundamental metaphysical distinction between Brahman and *Māyā*,

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<sup>301</sup> VS 4.116 comm., p. 105.

<sup>302</sup> VS 5.168 comm., p. 180.

<sup>303</sup> VS 5.156 comm., p. 152.

<sup>304</sup> VS 5.168 comm., p. 180.

the real and the unreal, consciousness and non-consciousness. The analogy is *sattva*:Brahman :: *rajas-and-tamas*:Māyā.

Māyā, the unreal, can thus be described either in a relationship of continuity with Brahman, or in a relationship of discontinuity. The quality of *sattva* points to a relationship of continuity; *sattva* as luminous, as connected with awareness, is unreal but nonetheless points to or reflects the real, while *rajas* and *tamas*, as connected with projection and veiling, are unreal and point away from the real. This dual relationship also plays out in the distinction between God (*Īśvara*) and the cosmos. As we shall see, the whole of the cosmos excepting *Īśvara* is said to be a result of Māyā as dominated by *tamas*. *Īśvara*, by contrast, is associated with Māyā as dominated by *sattva*. Thus again, one might say that *Īśvara* is unreal but in a way that points to the real, while the cosmos is unreal and points away from the real.

Finally, this dual relationship of continuity and discontinuity has profound implications for epistemology. I noted above that the *vṛtti* epistemology in the higher framework is essentially about creating a mediation between consciousness and non-consciousness. This mediating function of individual intelligence is especially clear in the doctrines of reflection and semblance, where the luminosity in particular acts of cognition is none other than a reflection (whether real or unreal, *pratibimba* or *ābhāsa*) of the pure consciousness of Brahman. Here the *cit-pratibimba* or *cid-ābhāsa*, the reflection of consciousness within the individual mind, plays an analogous role to that of *sattva* or *Īśvara* within Māyā. Indeed, the consciousness reflected within the individual is simply a smaller-scale or less pure instance of continuity than we have with *Īśvara*. As we shall see, if *Īśvara* is associated with pure *sattva*, the individual mind is also associated with *sattva*, though in a less pure, “tainted” form of the quality.

Recall that a *vr̥tti* in the broadest sense is simply a mental transformation, or loosely speaking, a “state of mind.” Psychologically, the three *guṇas* correspond to different types of *vr̥ttis*. *Vr̥tti* in the narrow sense of cognition, an awareness-bearing mental transformation, is associated, as we have seen, with the quality of *sattva*. In VS chapter 6 (in a discussion of passions and detachment) Niścaldās adds that *sāttvika vr̥ttis* are further associated with joy or bliss. He also describes *vr̥ttis* associated with *rajas*: “a *vr̥tti* having the form of desire pertains to *rajas*.”<sup>305</sup> And later he tells us that while desire, anger, etc. are *rājasa-vr̥ttis*, “confusion etc.” are *vr̥ttis* pertaining to *tamas*.<sup>306</sup> What is important to stress for now is that the *vr̥tti* par excellence is the *vr̥tti* which leads to knowledge, and this kind of *vr̥tti* is associated with *sattva*, since *sattva* has the nature of luminosity.

#### *Vedāntic cosmology*

With this background on the three *guṇas*, we can now turn to Niścaldās’s cosmology, with an eye to understanding the make-up and functioning of the mind. For Niścaldās, the mind serves as the bearer of awareness but is not itself conscious; it is a product of *Māyā*, the primordial “stuff” out of which the universe is made. Scholars have often noted that this interpretation of *Māyā* as a quasi-material, positive entity appears to be a departure from the view of Śaṅkara, who treats *Māyā* as a synonym for ignorance but not as an entity in its own right.<sup>307</sup> Whatever Śaṅkara’s position might have been, the post-Śaṅkara equation of *Māyā* with *prakṛti* (the “prime matter” of Sāṃkhya cosmology) has an attractive degree of explanatory power, and it

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<sup>305</sup> VS 6B.9a comm., p. 226.

<sup>306</sup> VS 7.25 comm., p. 309.

<sup>307</sup> See Saccidanandendra 1989 and Hacker’s well-known essay “Distinctive Features of the Doctrine and Terminology of Śaṅkara: *Avidyā*, *Nāmarūpa*, *Māyā*, *Īśvara*” (1995, pp. 57-100).

serves as the basis for the correspondences between epistemology and cosmology that I hope to establish in this section.

Māyā is referred to by many names, according to Nīścaldās: “*Pradhāna*, *prakṛti*, *Māyā*, non-awareness (*ajñāna*), ignorance (*avidyā*), [and] *śakti* are [all] names of the same entity (*ekavastu*).” Each term picks out a slightly different aspect of this entity, however:

(1) Having brought about the dissolution of all effects within itself, the neutral nature [which endures] at the time of [cosmic] dissolution is called *pradhāna*. (2) The nature in which there is a predominance of the quality of *tamas*, and which is fit to serve as the material cause of creation, is called *prakṛti*. (3) Without the complex of space, time, etc. it would be impossible for a magic show (*indra-jāla*) to take place. *Māyā* means a magic show (or “illusion”). Similarly, it would be impossible [to find] desire etc. (i.e. the desire to create) in the absolute, non-dual Brahman. Giving rise to those things, it is called *Māyā*. (4) It covers the true nature (*svarūpa*) [of things]; hence it is called non-awareness (*ajñāna*). (5) It is destroyed through knowledge of Brahman; hence it is called ignorance (*avidyā*). And (6) it never resides independently but always resides in consciousness. Hence it is also called *śakti*.<sup>308</sup>

Here the connections between cosmology and epistemology begin to emerge explicitly. *Māyā* is ignorance, which conceals the true nature of Brahman and which is removed through knowledge. But *Māyā* is also the material cause of the world. In the neutral, non-manifest stages between each cycle of creation and destruction, it is known as *pradhāna*. When the balance of the three *guṇas* is upset and *tamas* predominates, the cycle of creation begins. At that time, Nīścaldās explains, *Māyā* is known as *prakṛti*. The parallels with Sāṃkhya are obvious, though it is important to note that for Vedāntic cosmology, *prakṛti* is ultimately unreal. Or rather, it is neither existent nor non-existent; it is *māyā*, “magic” or “illusion.”

Nīścaldās’s account of creation begins with the Lord (Īśvara), whom he identifies as consciousness in association with *Māyā* in its purest form, or in his own words, *Māyā* in which the quality of *sattva* predominates. At the time of cosmic dissolution, he explains, the various *karmas* created by souls in the previous cycle of creation still exist in subtle form. The Lord

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<sup>308</sup> VS 5.167 comm., pp. 167-8.

then thinks: “For the sake of souls’ experiencing [the fruits of these *karmas*], I will create the world.” “From this desire of the Lord,” Nīścaldās explains, there arises a form of Māyā “in which the quality of *tamas* predominates”—viz., *prakṛti*, according to the definitions of Māyā cited above—and from that *tāmasa* Māyā the five elements (ether, air, fire, water, and earth) are successively produced.<sup>309</sup> Ether arises directly from Māyā, air arises from ether, and so on. Note how Māyā in which *sattva* predominates—i.e., Māyā associated with the Lord—is temporally prior to Māyā in which *tamas* predominates. It would perhaps not be going too far to suggest that this relationship reflects, in its own order, the logical priority of Brahman to Māyā, or of consciousness to non-conscious things.

The five elements produced from Māyā are not the same as the gross five elements we perceive in the world. Rather, they are the five elements existing in a subtle, imperceptible form. Even though these subtle five elements are the product of Māyā in which *tamas* predominates, all three *guṇas* nonetheless exist in each of the five elements, as indeed all three *guṇas* exist in everything without exception. Ether, therefore, has a *sattva* portion, a *rajas* portion, and a *tamas* portion, as do the other four elements. The next stage of creation involves the mixing of these portions. Specifically, the *sattva* portion of each element gives rise to the five senses:

The five sense-organs are fashioned through the quality of *sattva* in each [of the five] elements respectively. ...

1. From the quality of *sattva* in ether, hearing [arises];
2. From the quality of *sattva* in air, touch;

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<sup>309</sup> VS 5.156 comm., pp. 149-150. —If the creator is associated with Māyā in which *sattva* predominates, and creation is a product of Māyā in which *tamas* predominates, what role does *rajas* play? A similar question arises in the Sāṃkhya system, to which we might usefully turn for a possible answer. Vācaspati Miśra, in his *Tattva-kaumudī* commentary on the SK, poses the question: “If all the products are evolved by the action of *sattva* and *tamas* attributes only, then what good is *rajas*, which serves no useful purpose?” Vācaspati answers: “Just because the *rajas* attribute does not produce exclusively any separate product, it cannot be said that the *rajas* attribute serves no useful purpose, inasmuch as it energizes both *sattva* and *tamas* attributes, which, by themselves, are absolutely inert and as such incapable of performing any function” (trans. Virupakshananda, p. 70). Nīścaldās does not address the role of *rajas* in his cosmogonic account, but this role would certainly make sense.

3. From the quality of *sattva* in fire, sight;
4. From the quality of *sattva* in water, taste; and
5. From the quality of *sattva* in earth, there is smell.

These five sense-organs are means (*sādhana*) to awareness. Hence they are known as organs of awareness (*jñāna-indriya*). Awareness [arises] from the quality of *sattva*; hence their origin is said to be from the quality of *sattva* [in] the elements.<sup>310</sup>

Here we are in the thick of what I am referring to as material epistemology. Instrumental epistemology, or the theory of *pramāṇas*, is interested in the sense-organs insofar as their proper functioning is necessary for sense-perception (which is one of the *pramāṇas*), but the question of what exactly the sense-organs are made of, and why, say, the eyes are good for seeing whereas ears are good for hearing, are not addressed in most discussions of Indian epistemology. Niścaldās is no exception; we get this information only in his account of the creation of the universe in VS chapter 5 (the dialogue with Adṛṣṭi), and not in his explicit discussion of epistemology in VS chapter 4 (the dialogue with Tattvadrṣṭi). Nonetheless, the relevance of cosmology to epistemology in the passage above is striking. The passage seems to suggest a principle of “like is perceived by like”: the sense-organs are themselves material (though subtle—note that sight etc. are distinct from, though related to, the gross eyes, ears, tongue, nose, and skin<sup>311</sup>), and they correspond one-for-one with each of the subtle five elements. But they are means to awareness (*jñāna*), because awareness is associated with the quality of *sattva*, and the five sense-organs are all exceedingly *sāttvika* by nature. Indeed, though we say “sense-organs” in English, the term in Sanskrit is in fact *jñānendriya*, or organs of awareness.

Just as the *sattva* portions of the five subtle elements gives rise to five organs of awareness, the *rajas* portions give rise to five motor powers, or organs of action (*karmendriya*):

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<sup>310</sup> VS 5.156 comm., p. 152.

<sup>311</sup> VS 5.156 comm., p. 153.



the organs of speech, hands, feet, genitals, and anus.<sup>312</sup> Here the correspondences are slightly less perfect. Speech corresponds to the *rajas* portion in ether, which makes good sense, since sound is believed to be transmitted through ether; the anus is associated with earth; and the genitals are associated with water (perhaps through association with semen and blood). The remaining two correspondences are less intuitive: hands are associated with air, and the feet are associated with fire. “These five organs,” Nīścaldās concludes, “are means (*sādhana*) to action. Hence they are known as organs of action.”<sup>313</sup>

One might expect, out of a concern for symmetry, that the remaining *tamas* portions of the five subtle elements would give rise to the gross five elements, and that the world of gross objects would arise from various interactions of these five elements. The fact of the matter is more complicated, owing to the adoption within Advaita Vedānta of a curious doctrine whose historical origins are unclear: *pañcī-karaṇa*, literally “making five[fold],” or “quintuplication.”<sup>314</sup> There is no need to go into details here; Nīścaldās in any case gives two different versions of the theory. The basic idea is that portions of all five subtle elements are mixed together to produce the gross elements. Gross ether, for example, has a larger portion of ether, which is why it is called ether, but it also has portions of the other four elements mixed within it. Nīścaldās never says that it is, specifically, the *tāmasa* portions of the subtle elements that combine to form the gross elements, but elsewhere this seems clear, as when he writes in another chapter that objects such as pots are “a product of the quality of *tamas* in the

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<sup>312</sup> Again, note that these are subtle organs, distinct from though related to the gross body parts to which each corresponds. In SK 28 the organs are identified not by their gross body parts but as “speech, manipulation, locomotion, excretion, and gratification,” respectively (trans. Virupakshananda, p. 74).

<sup>313</sup> VS 5.156 comm., p. 152.

<sup>314</sup> VS 5.156 comm., p. 153. On the *Pañcīkaraṇa*, a *prakaraṇa* text attributed to Śaṅkara, see Sundaresan 2002.

elements.”<sup>315</sup> (Indeed, the Sanskrit translation of *The Ocean of Inquiry* in the section of quintuplication, takes the liberty of changing the Hindi original “each element is divided into two equal parts” to “the portion of the quality of *tamas* in each element is divided into two equal parts.”<sup>316</sup>) The *sattva* portion of each element thus produces the five sense-organs, the *rajas* portion of each element produces the five organs of action, and (most likely) the *tamas* portion of each element produces, after the process of quintuplication, the mixed, gross elements.

Two other products are extremely important to note. In addition to the *rajas* portion of each element contributing individually to the production of the organs of action, it is also said that the *rajas* portion of each element mixes together to produce a new product: *prāṇa*, or vital force, which is thus composed of the *rajas* portions of all five elements.<sup>317</sup> Similarly, the *sattva* portion of each element mixes together to produce a new product: *antaḥ-karaṇa*, or mind.<sup>318</sup> Here we have an answer to the question: what is the mind made of? It is a combination of the *sattva* portions of all five subtle elements. Indeed, because it is produced from *sattva*, Niścaldās tells us, the mind can even be referred to by the noun *sattva*, as it is in his verse describing the mind’s production: “[From] the mixing of the *sattva* portions of the five [elements], *sattva* (i.e. the mind) is produced.”<sup>319</sup> The mind’s essential nature is thus *sattva*.

To summarize Niścaldās’s cosmology: Brahman alone exists, but the illusion of *Māyā* is also beginningless. *Māyā* qualified by pure *sattva* is like the cosmic “Mind” of God, while *Māyā*

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<sup>315</sup> VS 4.116 comm., p. 105.

<sup>316</sup> VS 5.156 comm., p. 153; Vāsudeva Brahmendra Sarasvatī 1986, p. 159.

<sup>317</sup> VS 5.156 comm., pp. 151-2. —*Prāṇa* has sub-varieties which need not concern us here.

<sup>318</sup> VS 5.156 comm., p. 151.

<sup>319</sup> VS 5.156, p. 149.

qualified by *tamas* is the prime matter from which he creates. From this prime matter arise the five subtle elements, which produce the entirety of subtle creation: individual minds (*antaḥ-karaṇa*), life-forces (*prāṇa*), sense-organs (*jñānendriya*), and organs of action (*karmendriya*). The five subtle elements combine to produce the five gross elements, which in turn produce the entirety of gross creation, which serves as objects for the sense-organs. “[If one tried] to describe all of the products of Māyā in full,” Nīścaldās concludes his account, “there would be no end to the description of the objects made by Māyā, even with millions (*koṭi*) of lifetimes of Brahmā.”<sup>320</sup>

There are several differences between this Vedāntic cosmology and the classical Sāṃkhya system as outlined in the SK, and a few of them are worth dwelling on for a moment. First, the Vedāntic system specifies that *tamas* is at the root of manifestation; Māyā gives rise to the subtle and gross orders of creation only when the quality of *tamas* dominates. In the SK, by contrast, the union of *puruṣa* and *prakṛti* gives rise to manifestation, and there is no mention of a specific *guṇa*; rather, all three qualities seem to be equally involved. This difference is suggestive of the realism of Sāṃkhya in contrast to the metaphysics of illusion in Vedānta, where the world itself is a product of the quality associated with ignorance and darkness. Second, in the SK both the sense-organs and the organs of action are products of *sattva*, whereas in the Vedāntic system the organs of action are associated with *rajas*, and only the sense-organs (lit. “organs of awareness”) are products of *sattva*. This might seem a minor point, but the specialization in the Vedānta system helps strengthen the association of *sattva* with awareness. Third and finally, in the Sāṃkhya system the mind or intellect (*buddhi*)<sup>321</sup> is not a

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<sup>320</sup> VS 5.156 comm., p. 154.

<sup>321</sup> In Vedānta the “inner faculty” (*antaḥ-karaṇa*), which I translate as mind, includes *buddhi* and *manas* (as well as *ahaṃkāra* and *citta*); in Sāṃkhya, *buddhi* is distinct from, and comogonically prior to, *manas*. *Manas* is classified as a

product of any particular quality. SK 23, which defines *buddhi*, says that *buddhi* can be either *sāttvika* (in which case there is virtue, knowledge, dispassion, and power) or *tāmasa* (in which case there are the opposites), but it does not specify that either represents the true nature of *buddhi*. The Vedāntic account, by contrast, is very clear that mind (*antaḥ-karaṇa*) is a product of *sattva*, which suggests that awareness is in its very nature, while a predominance of *tamas* in the mind would mean that the proper nature of the mind has been distorted.

“The mind,” Nīścaldās writes, “is the cause of awareness, and the origin of awareness is accepted [as coming] from the quality of *sattva*; hence the mind is a product of the quality of *sattva* in the five elements.”<sup>322</sup> Here again we have a clear statement of “material epistemology.” Now we come to a crucial question: what is the connection between Nīścaldās’s instrumental epistemology—the *pramāṇa*-based framework explored above—and this material epistemology? Elsewhere in *The Ocean of Inquiry* Nīścaldās provides a key for understanding the connection. He writes: “The mind is pure (or ‘clear,’ *svaccha*), for it is a product of the quality of *sattva*; hence there [can] be the reflection of consciousness within the mind.”<sup>323</sup> He goes on to explain that since *vṛttis* are products of the mind (they are mental transformations), they too are able to reflect consciousness. Indeed, a *vṛtti* is said to arise not just from the mind but from the mind together with a reflection of consciousness: “When a *vṛtti* is produced, it is produced by the mind united with the reflection.”<sup>324</sup> For this reason, Nīścaldās says, the *vṛtti* (which, recall, is non-conscious) arises together with a reflection of consciousness.

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special kind of sense-organ, while *buddhi* is broader in the range of its functions and is the locus of merit and knowledge. I have thus focused this comparison of “mind” in both systems on the *antaḥ-karaṇa* from Vedānta and *buddhi* from Sāṃkhya.

<sup>322</sup> VS 5.156 comm., p. 151.

<sup>323</sup> VS 4.116 comm., p. 104.

<sup>324</sup> VS 4.116 comm., p. 104.

This is the link between Niścaldās's instrumental epistemology and his material epistemology: it is the *sāttvika* nature of the mind that allows the mind to reflect the light of pure consciousness and thus be a bearer of awareness. Every instance of cognition, as we saw above, is a reflection (or semblance-reflection) of the consciousness of Brahman. Objects such as pots, because of their *tāmasa* nature, are incapable of reflecting the light of consciousness; hence they appear as non-conscious objects. The mind, by contrast, is capable of reflecting the light of consciousness, precisely because of its *sāttvika* nature. Niścaldās offers (on separate occasions) three images of how the mind operates as a vehicle for the reflection of consciousness: the mind can be compared to a crystal, to water, or to a mirror. In VS chapter 4 he writes: "Just as a clear crystal placed over a large red flower glitters with the redness of the flower, reflecting the red flower, likewise the mind, which has its locus (*āśrit*) in the Immutable, glitters with the light of the Immutable."<sup>325</sup> Recall that the term "the Immutable" (*kūṭastha*) refers to pure consciousness insofar as it is the substratum of individual experiences of consciousness. The mind is precisely what mediates these experiences of consciousness, and it does so in the manner of a crystal reflecting color. Niścaldās goes on to point out how it is the *material* properties of the crystal—and of the mind—that allow for the possibility of reflection: "Just as a crystal is exceedingly clear, so too is the mind exceedingly clear, since it is the product of the quality of *sattva*. Hence 'reflection' is a name for the glittering (or 'shining forth') of the Immutable."<sup>326</sup> Here we have a striking definition of everyday consciousness as embodied in *vṛttis*: it is none other than a "shining forth of the Immutable." Every time we perceive an object such as a pot, the experience of consciousness in our perception is,

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<sup>325</sup> VS 4.75 comm., p. 92.

<sup>326</sup> VS 4.75 comm., p. 92.

according to Niścaldās, a reflection of the light of pure consciousness. When, therefore, Niścaldās presents liberative knowledge as existing on a continuum with ordinary kinds of knowledge, this need not be read as downgrading liberative knowledge to something ordinary; his epistemology can equally be read as elevating ordinary instances of knowledge to something extraordinary: even everyday instances of awareness become a “shining forth” of the consciousness of Brahman.

The second image Niścaldās offers to explain the reflection of pure consciousness within the individual mind is based on the reflective properties of water. Following Vidyāranya, Niścaldās stretches this analogy to a tenuous and not altogether convincing extreme, likening four kinds of consciousness—(1) the pure consciousness of Brahman, (2) pure consciousness as the substratum of individual experiences of consciousness (“the Immutable” or “the Witness”), (3) the consciousness of Īśvara (technically an *ābhāsa* of consciousness), and (4) the consciousness of the *jīva* (also an *ābhāsa* of consciousness)—to, respectively, (1) space as all-pervading, (2) space as contained in a water-pot, (3) space (or sky) as reflected in the fine water-drops contained in a cloud, and (4) space as reflected in the water in a pot.<sup>327</sup> Without going into all the details, we may note that the two keys images are of delimitation (the pot defining a particular space) and reflection. Niścaldās argues that just as the sky is boundless yet can be reflected in the finite water of a pot, likewise pure, all-pervading consciousness can be reflected in the “water” of the individual mind.

The third image Niścaldās uses is that of mind as mirror. He introduces the image specifically to explain the connection between *sattva* and knowledge, reiterating and expanding on a point we have already seen:

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<sup>327</sup> VS 4.72ff., p. 88ff.

The mind is a product of the quality of *sattva* in the elements, so it is clear (or “pure”). Whereas a thing like a pot is a product of the quality of *tamas* in the elements, so it is not clear. Only an object that is clear is fit for reflection. An object that is unclear (or “impure,” “tainted”) is not fit for reflection. For example, a [looking-]glass and its cover are both products of [the element of] earth. But the [looking-]glass is clear, [so] a reflection of the face [appears] in it. The cover is not clear, so reflections do not appear in it. Likewise, the inner faculty is clear, since it is a product of the quality of *sattva*. [Only] in it does the reflection of consciousness appear. The body etc. and the pot etc. are not clear, since they are products of the quality of *tamas*. In them, the reflection of consciousness does not appear.<sup>328</sup>

The importance of this passage for the topic at hand can hardly be over-stressed. Our mirrors today do not usually have covers, so we might more readily take as an example a mirror wrapped in a blanket (say, to keep it safe for moving). Why is it that the mirror reflects my face only when not covered by a blanket? Both the mirror and its covering are “products of earth”; more broadly, they are both material things, and neither has the nature of light. But one of them is capable of reflecting light, while the other is not, because they are made of different things. *Sattva* by nature is capable of reflecting the light of consciousness, while *tamas* is not. Notice also that the word used to describe a non-reflective cover here can mean “impure,” “tarnished,” or “tainted”; I will return to this point later when we come, in the next chapter, to Niścaldās’s discussion of mental purity as a prerequisite for the study of Vedānta. Finally, we should note that the example of a cover for a mirror is aptly chosen: Niścaldās could have simply said that a mirror reflects things but a wall does not; instead, he specifically chose as his example something that covers a mirror, with the implication that the mind itself can be covered or obscured.

Recall how Niścaldās, in his discussion of the different ways of conceiving of the relationship between Brahman and the *jīva*, says that doctrine of reflection is superior to the doctrine of delimitation because it is better able to account for the difference between knowers and non-knowers. Without the doctrine of reflection, one might well wonder: if both

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<sup>328</sup> VS 4.116 comm., p. 113.

minds and pots ultimately have the nature of pure consciousness, or, from another perspective, neither has the nature of consciousness but both are non-conscious, then how do we distinguish between minds and pots? What makes a mind seem to sparkle with awareness while pots make for dull conversationalists? The answer is that one reflects consciousness while the other does not, and this, again, correlates with the presence or absence of *sattva*, as Nīścaldās reiterates: “The mind is a product of the quality of *sattva*, [and] since it is therefore clear, it is capable of bearing a reflection of consciousness. Other objects are not clear; hence they are not capable of bearing a reflection.”<sup>329</sup> According to Nīścaldās, this explains why only the pure consciousness which is associated with the mind—which is capable of reflecting consciousness—is referred to as a *knower*. Consciousness is also associated with pots and the like, but because they are incapable of reflecting that consciousness, they are not knowers.<sup>330</sup>

In Advaita Vedānta, consciousness is all-pervasive. Hence all things are in constant contact with consciousness, so to speak, just as ether is in contact with all objects. It is the property of *sattva* to reflect the light of consciousness, and thus to illuminate objects. By contrast, it is the property of *tamas* to be dull and non-reflective, and indeed to conceal things, just as a blanket might conceal a mirror. “The pot,” Nīścaldās explains, “is a product of the quality of *tamas*. Hence it is non-conscious by nature, and ignorance and its obscuring/veiling [reside] in it. ... The quality of *tamas* has an obscuring/veiling nature. Hence the pot etc., devoid

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<sup>329</sup> VS 4.116 comm., pp. 113-4.

<sup>330</sup> Interestingly, Nīścaldās believes that the analogy *sattva*:knower :: *tamas*:known applies even in dreams. In the waking world, ignorance (conceived as a material cause) gives rise to the subtle elements, which give rise to the mind as well as to the objects the mind perceives. In the case of dreams, ignorance gives rise directly to everything perceived in the dream, without intermediaries. Nonetheless, even in a dream it is a *sāttvika* transformation of ignorance which produces our illusory knowing self, and a simultaneous *tāmasa* transformation of ignorance which produces the objects (pink elephants, talking pigs, etc.) we perceive in dreams. The doctrine of *dṛṣṭi-sṛṣṭi* then breaks down the barrier between dreaming and waking; its position is precisely that all things are a direct and simultaneous transformation of ignorance. (Cf. VS 6A.9 comm., p. 199).



of light, are [entirely] dark.”<sup>331</sup> Note that the obscuring nature of *tamas* is opposed by the illuminating nature of *sattva*, but not by the light of pure consciousness, since strictly speaking, nothing can oppose pure consciousness. A blanket cannot cover the sun and prevent it from shining. In the very act of trying to cover the sun, the blanket itself would be illumined by the sun’s rays. But the blanket can cover a mirror, and prevent the sun from shining there. Or it can be used to cover people’s eyes, to prevent them from seeing the sun. In other words, *tamas* is the opposite of *sattva*, but not the opposite of Brahman.

For Advaitins, the pure consciousness of Brahman is always shining, even in the midst of people’s ignorance, just as the sun still shines even when one’s eyes are covered. This point has important implications for the question with which I began this chapter: what kind of “knowledge” is it that liberates, according to Advaita Vedānta? On the account sketched so far, it is *not* the pure consciousness of Brahman that liberates; in other words, it is not the transcendent, non-dual awareness experienced by a sage that liberates, because this awareness is always present. Tattvadr̥ṣṭi himself, like everyone else, possesses this awareness even at the start of the chapter. What liberates must instead be a kind of knowledge that removes the metaphorical blanket from our eyes. In Niścaldās’s language, the kind of knowledge that liberates is a knowledge that removes the veil of ignorance—the portion of Māyā that conceals our true nature—and strange as it might sound, this is not something that pure consciousness can do. Rather, the function of removing the veils created by ignorance falls to *vyttis*, which in their *sāttvika* nature are capable of opposing the *tāmasa* nature of the veil that conceals our nature. We thus return to the point I made earlier: it is, in a sense, a perfectly ordinary kind of

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<sup>331</sup> VS 4.116 comm., p. 105.

knowledge—a *vyṛtti*-based knowledge, i.e., a particular mental state brought about by one of the accepted means of knowledge—that yields liberation.

Recall that in Niścaldās’s cosmology, unlike in Sāṃkhya, manifestation itself is associated with *tamas*: everything, from the mind down to the gross elements, is a product of Māyā in which the quality of *tamas* dominates. As such, there is a sense in which everything is veiled by nature, or rather, everything veils: the things themselves, through their quality of *tamas*, act like blankets covering up the light of consciousness. Minds and pots alike are products of ignorance, and ignorance veils the reality of Brahman. Nonetheless, within this *tamas*-dominated order, we can distinguish between things that are relatively more *sāttvika* (like minds) and things that are relatively more *tāmasa* (like pots). In the case of minds, the subtle elements proceed from *tāmasa* Māyā, but then the *sāttvika* portions of these elements combine to make minds. In the case of pots, however, it is (most likely) the *tāmasa* portions of the subtle elements which, through the process of quintuplication, lead to the gross elements. In the case of gross objects, there is thus a double procession from *tamas*, or a double veil of *tamas*, so to speak.

Niścaldās never makes this point himself, but I am convinced that this cosmological principle—the double procession or double veil of *tamas*—can help us make sense of some otherwise strange notions elsewhere in *The Ocean of Inquiry*. For example, at one point Niścaldās writes: “Ignorance veils consciousness, and it also veils the pot etc., which are [already] veiled by nature.”<sup>332</sup> Why would ignorance need to veil something that is already veiled by nature? Or again, think of the strange image Niścaldās uses to describe the functioning of *vyṛttis*: “[Imagine] a vessel of iron or clay covered up by [an overturned] tub

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<sup>332</sup> VS 4.116 comm., p. 105.

sitting in a dark [room]. Even if one shatters the tub with a stick, without bringing a lamp to it, the vessel will not be illumined, even though it is uncovered [now]. But with a lamp it will be illumined.”<sup>333</sup> Why not simply describe knowledge in terms of illumination? To see a pot sitting in a dark room, you need a lamp; similarly, for an object of knowledge to be illumined, you need a *ṛtti*. Why complicate the analogy with talk of overturned tubs and sticks used to shatter them? Is this not a clear example of *gurutva*?

Niścaldās is aware of the problem: “Even though there is no purpose in veiling things which are already veiled by nature,” he concedes, “a veiling object can still veil them, regardless of whether there is a purpose, even when the object is already veiled. This is well-known to all.”<sup>334</sup> It is indeed undeniable that one can, say, throw down several blankets on top of each other. But an appeal to real-world messiness does not solve the problem of *gurutva*. And in fact, although the above answer is the only one Niścaldās gives, he has the resources to give a better answer: the pot is doubly veiled, he could respond, because it proceeds from *tamas* twice. Minds, by contrast, proceed from *tamas* only once in Niścaldās’s account of the creation of the universe. Now, as we have seen throughout this chapter, Vedāntic ontology is hierarchical, with at least three tiers:

Tier 1: Pure consciousness (which illumines);

Tier 2: Mind (which reflects consciousness and therefore illumines);

Tier 3: Objects (which are illumined).

These tiers can be explained either cosmologically or epistemologically. Cosmologically, tier 2 emerges during the first procession from *tamas*, when *Māyā* in which the quality of *tamas*

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<sup>333</sup> VS 4.116 comm., p. 106.

<sup>334</sup> VS 4.116 comm., p. 105.

predominates gives rise to the subtle elements, the sense-organs, the organs of action, *prāṇa*, and the mind; whereas tier 3 emerges from a second procession of *tamas*, when the *tāmasa* portions of the subtle elements give rise to the rest of creation. Epistemologically, one can speak of tier 2 (the mind) as a veil with respect to tier 1 (pure consciousness), but as relatively unveiled with respect to tier 3 (objects), which it illuminates. Whether one explains the relationship in terms of *tamas* or of proximity to consciousness, tier 3 is at a double remove from tier 1. Objects such as pots are thus doubly veiled, so to speak. To quote Nīścaldās again: “Ignorance veils consciousness, and it also veils the pot etc., which are already veiled by nature.” The first veil applies also to the mind; the second applies only to objects, which stand in need of an outside source of illumination.

Up to this point, I have been treating the mind as essentially *sāttvika*, which it certainly is relative to objects like pots. We have already seen indications that the mind is not composed purely of *sattva*, however. Nīścaldās frequently contrasts the pure *sattva* of Īśvara with the “tainted *sattva*” of the individual soul. More technically, Īśvara is the conjunction of (i) pure consciousness, (ii) *Māyā* in which there is a preponderance of *sattva*, and (iii) the reflection of consciousness in that *Māyā*. The soul, by contrast, is a conjunction of (i) pure consciousness, (ii) the mind (which is a product of “tainted *sattva*”), and (iii) the reflection of consciousness in the mind. Significantly, the word “tainted” (*malina*), which also means impure, is precisely the word Nīścaldās used in the analogy of a mirror: the mirror-cover is “tainted” or “tarnished,” which is why it does not reflect light the way the mirror does. Īśvara’s “Mind,” so to speak, is almost perfectly *sāttvika*, whereas the individual mind always has some admixture of *rajas* and *tamas*.

Niścaldās explicitly connects Īśvara’s omniscience with the *sāttvika* substance of his “Mind,” thus further strengthening the connection between *sattva* and knowledge:

He is omniscient. He is the knower of all objects. The reason for this is as follows: within Māyā there is the quality of pure *sattva*. [When] the quality of *sattva* is not overwhelmed by the qualities of *tamas* and *rajas*, but itself overwhelms the qualities of *tamas* and *rajas*, it is known as the quality of pure *sattva*.

Awareness arises through the quality of *sattva*. Hence the quality of *sattva* is luminous by nature. [As for] the reflection of pure consciousness within Māyā [consisting of] pure *sattva*, there is no veil between it and its nature, or between it and objects. Hence it is free, and it is omniscient.<sup>335</sup>

The passage begins by asserting that Īśvara is omniscient, and goes on immediately to explain that the reason for this omniscience is the quality of pure *sattva*. Niścaldās then glosses the phrase “pure *sattva*,” explaining that since (as in Sāṃkhya) the three *guṇas* can never be separated from one another, for *sattva* to be pure really means for it to predominate over the other two qualities. Next Niścaldās reaffirms that awareness (*jñāna*) arises through *sattva*. Finally, he introduces a new point: there is no veil between either (a) Īśvara (or more precisely, between the reflection of pure consciousness within Īśvara’s “Mind”) and his own nature, or between (b) Īśvara and objects. The first half is true of those who achieve liberation, too: through knowledge of the self, the veil (in the form of ignorance) obscuring their true nature is removed. Īśvara is always like this, which is why he is called *nitya-mukta*, or eternally liberated. Presumably, however, the veils between liberated sages and objects still exists, which is why they are not *ipso facto* omniscient.<sup>336</sup>

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<sup>335</sup> VS 4.89 comm., p. 94.

<sup>336</sup> Interestingly, although sages do not seem to be omniscient on this view, being embodied as such is not necessarily an obstacle to omniscience. In a fascinating excursus on the nature of the bodies of Rāma and Kṛṣṇa (VS 4.117 comm., pp. 115–117), Niścaldās argues that their bodies are in fact direct products of Māyā, hence they are made of pure *sattva*. This is a common enough view among Vaiṣṇava theologians, but in this Advaita Vedāntic context it sounds rather as if the visible bodies of the avatars are made, substantially, from the Mind of God, so to speak.

Elsewhere Niścaldās explicitly connects the state of bondage with the predominance of *rajas* and *tamas*: “On account of an abundance of the quality of *tamas* and the quality of *rajas*, the portion of the individual which is a reflection within ignorance has its nature veiled by ignorance. Hence there is bondage in the *jīva* [but] not in the Lord.”<sup>337</sup> And again, in yet another place, Niścaldās connects Īśvara’s extremely *sāttvika* nature not just with omniscience but with omnipotence, which seems to echo the association in SK 23 of a *sāttvika buddhi* not just with awareness but also with “power,” *aiśvarya*, which by etymology is precisely the power that is associated with a lord, *īśvara*: “In the *upādhi* (overlay or superimposition on pure consciousness) which is the Lord there is the quality of pure *sattva*. Hence in the Lord there are the properties of omnipotence, omniscience, etc.”<sup>338</sup> Be that as it may, the implication for epistemology is clear: knowledge is always connected with *sattva*. In the case of the Lord, the *sattva* is so pure that it leads to perfect, unhindered knowledge. In the case of individual souls, the *sattva* is tainted but still leads to limited knowledge, via the operation of *sāttvika vṛttis*.

If even the pure *sattva* of Māyā is not totally separate from the qualities of *tamas* and *rajas*, this is all the more true of mind. Even though mind is composed of the *sattva* portions of the elements, such that it can even be referred to not just as *sāttvika* (an adjective) but as *sattva* (the noun for the quality), nonetheless, the *sattva* of the mind is a tainted *sattva*. “The quality of tainted *sattva*,” Niścaldās explains, “refers to the quality of *sattva* which is overwhelmed by the quality of *rajas* and the quality of *tamas*.”<sup>339</sup> Again, he uses the same word *malina* (“tainted,” “impure”) when explaining, elsewhere, the difference between minds and pots: “Objects such as pots are transformations of ignorance’s quality of *tamas*. Hence they are tainted (*malina*),

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<sup>337</sup> VS 4.89 comm., p. 94.

<sup>338</sup> VS 6B.42 comm., p. 272.

<sup>339</sup> VS 4.89 comm., p. 94.

and there is no reflection [of consciousness] in them. Whereas a *vr̥tti*, as a transformation of the quality of *sattva*, is pure, and there is a reflection in it.”<sup>340</sup> Here again we see an implicit threefold or even fourfold hierarchy. Relative to pots, the cognitive transformations of an individual mind are pure and not tainted. But the *sattva* of the mind itself is tainted relative to the pure *sattva* of Māyā. And as noted above, even pure *sattva* is not altogether devoid of traces of *rajas* and *tamas*. Finally, although Brahman is above the three *guṇas* and therefore cannot be described as *sāttvika*, one might speak of this progressive hierarchy of *sāttvika* realities as asymptotically approaching Brahman, who is described as supremely and eternally pure (*śuddha*).

In chapter 6 of the VS, Nīścaldās explicitly discusses the presence of *rajas* and *tamas* within the mind:

Although the mind is said to be a product of the quality of *sattva* [in] the elements, nevertheless, it is a product of the quality of *sattva* together with the quality of *rajas* and the quality of *tamas*, not solely of the quality of *sattva* [on its own]. If it were solely a product of the quality of *sattva*, then the mind would not have the fickle nature [that it does]. Similarly, there would not be any *rājas*-*vr̥ttis* such as lust, anger, etc., or [any] *tāmasa*-*vr̥ttis* such as confusion in the mind. Hence the mind is not a product solely of the quality of *sattva*.<sup>341</sup>

The mind’s primary quality is *sattva*, which is perhaps why the term *vr̥tti* refers primarily to *vr̥ttis* of awareness (which are *sāttvika*-*vr̥ttis*). But other states of mind are known from experience: mental states of agitation and excitation pertain to *rajas*, while states of heaviness and dullness result from *tamas*. Moreover, as Nīścaldās goes on to note, “These three qualities are also not the same in the minds of [different] people. Rather, they are less or greater. Hence, [as a result of] the lesser or greater [proportions] of the qualities, everyone has a distinct

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<sup>340</sup> VS 6A.9 comm., p. 199.

<sup>341</sup> VS 7.25 comm., p. 309.

nature.”<sup>342</sup> One would assume that those in whom *sattva* predominates will have a better chance of knowing the self, hence of achieving liberation, than those in whom the other qualities are stronger.

The connection between material and instrumental epistemology, or more specifically between the purity of *sattva* and the operation of *ṛttis*, should in theory apply to cases of everyday knowledge as well as to knowledge of the self. In the next chapter, we will see how mental purity serves as a prerequisite for knowledge of the self. What about cases of everyday knowledge? How does the level of one’s mental purity affect, say, one’s perception of a pot, or one’s inference of smoke from fire? Nīścaldās never addresses this question, but I believe there are resources in *The Ocean of Inquiry* to suggest a possible answer. While it is true that wicked people are, apparently, able to perceive pots, formulate inferences, and so on just as well (and in some cases even better than) virtuous people, the applicability of the theory of *sattva* as productive of awareness becomes clear when we contrast *sāttvika ṛttis*, or cognitive *ṛttis*, with *rājasa* and *tāmasa ṛttis*. For example, according to Nīścaldās, sleepiness is a *tāmasa ṛtti*, and we all know from experience how a sleepy state of mind impairs our ability to perceive and to reason. Similarly, desire is a *rājasa ṛtti*, and our desires, especially when they are strong and related to the object of knowledge, can certainly impair knowledge. This point is accepted even in Nyāya, and it is alluded to in passing in a discussion early in *The Ocean of Inquiry* in which an opponent objects to the idea of superimposition taking place in Brahman. The opponent argues that for there to be superimposition, certain conditions must be present, and one of these conditions is that there must be a problem (*doṣa*) with the knower. Specifically,

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<sup>342</sup> VS 7.25 comm., p. 309. —Nīścaldās also goes on to argue that given the nature of the mind, it is impossible for any human being—even a sage—not to experience desire. The difference between a sage and an ordinary human being is that ordinary human beings attribute their experience of desire to the self, while the sage recognizes that desire is a property of the mind, not of the unattached self.



the opponent mentions “a fault of greed, fear, etc.” as productive of superimposition.<sup>343</sup> Niścaldās explains this position in the course of refuting it: “Even a person who is detached and free of greed experiences the superimposition of silver in mother-of-pearl.”<sup>344</sup> This is not to deny the underlying principle, however: if you’re greedy, you’re more likely to see silver where there is only mother-of-pearl. Likewise, a fearful person—i.e., one in whom there is a non-*sāttvika* *vytti* of fear—is more likely to misperceive shadows as threats. From common experience, then, we know that a person who is alert, calm, and disinterested is more likely to perceive objects correctly, and this is precisely to say that a mind in which there is a preponderance of *sattva*, with the removal of the obstacles of opposing or interfering *vyttis* of *tamas* and *rajas*, is more likely to have a correct awareness, even of everyday objects.

The opponent who, in the passage just quoted, objects that superimposition requires certain pre-conditions also mentions, in addition to problems in the knower, problems in the means of knowledge, and here a stock example is used: “A fault such as jaundice in sense-organs such as the eye is a condition for superimposition.”<sup>345</sup> Niścaldās rejects the claim that this is a necessary condition for superimposition, but that is beside the point here. He would not reject the idea that jaundice causes people to misperceive the color of objects. What is notable is the parallel between faults in the knower and faults in the means of knowledge. Just as an impurity, taint, or defect in the eyes prevents us from seeing properly, an impurity, taint, or defect (in the form of *rājasa* and *tāmasa* *vyttis*) in the mind can prevent us from seeing properly.

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<sup>343</sup> VS 2.7 comm., p. 26.

<sup>344</sup> VS 2.13 comm., p. 48.

<sup>345</sup> VS 2.7 comm., p. 26.

Niścaldās's instrumental epistemology in *The Ocean of Inquiry* focuses on sense-perception and verbal testimony, and he does not discuss the other *pramāṇas*, such as inference, much at all.<sup>346</sup> However, we might again note that common experience furnishes evidence that non-*sāttvika* states of mind can easily mislead people in reasoning. One need only consider the difference between “reasoning” and “rationalization.” Indeed, following Niścaldās material epistemology, one might define rationalization as reasoning in which a *vr̥tti* of awareness is mixed with a *vr̥tti* of desire, a case of *sattva* tainted by *rajas*. The fault of desire leading us astray becomes even more problematic, and epistemologically significant, when one considers not just the subtlety of arguments but also the invisibility of desires. It is all too easy to deceive oneself, thinking one is following the argument where it leads when in fact one is being led by invisible or even sub-conscious desires—especially in the case of arguments where much is at stake. For example, it would surely be extremely difficult, and require either a great deal of training or a naturally *sāttvika* disposition, to reason about, say, the existence or non-existence of God without feeling the pull of desire, for atheists and theists alike have a great deal at stake. Another matter of common experience is the difference between reasoning and rhetoric; Indian philosophers have long been aware of the difference between truth-seeking debates and debates conducted with a desire to defeat an opponent. When *rajas* predominates, one will be much more likely to employ sophistry than when *sattva* predominates. Finally, in the case of verbal testimony as a means to knowledge, we might consider the case of people who, as the expression goes, hear only what they want to hear. We can see, then, how the presence of *rājasa* and *tāmasa* *vr̥ttis* within the mind can interfere with everyday acts of

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<sup>346</sup> On Niścaldās's view, perception and (first-/second-person) verbal testimony are the only two *pramāṇas* capable of producing direct awareness (*aparokṣa-jñāna*), which is the kind of awareness that leads to liberation; hence, again, his focus on these two *pramāṇas* in particular.

knowing. How much more, then, can these *vṛttis* interfere with knowledge of the self, which is a much subtler object of knowledge than external objects such as pots.

### *On epistemic conflict*

Before we turn to the next chapter, there is one final element of Niścaldās's epistemology to consider. I have already discussed his instrumental epistemology, both in its basic and its higher, idealist frameworks. At the basic level, a *vṛtti* or cognition, by way of one of the six means of knowledge, takes on the form of its object and thus produces a correct awareness. At the higher level, this *vṛtti*, by taking on the form of its object, removes the portion of ignorance concealing the object, and the reflection of pure consciousness within the *vṛtti* is then able to illumine the object. I have also discussed Niścaldās's material epistemology, arguing for the connection between Vedāntic epistemology and cosmology. *Vṛttis* are transformations of the mind, which is a product of *sattva*. *Sattva*, through its purity, is what is capable of reflecting consciousness.

The final element of Niścaldās's epistemology is the key distinction between two kinds of awareness: direct awareness (*pratyakṣa-jñāna*, *aparokṣa-jñāna*) and indirect awareness (*parokṣa-jñāna*). To take an everyday example: when you see a chair, the *pramāṇa* of sense-perception produces a direct knowledge of the chair; when someone you trust tells you there is a chair in another room, the *pramāṇa* of testimony also produces knowledge of the chair, but in this case it is indirect knowledge. Or again, to take the classic example of inference: when you see smoke rising from a mountain, you infer the existence of fire on the mountain. This knowledge of fire is perfectly accurate, trustworthy knowledge, but it remains indirect, whereas your knowledge of the smoke, which is perceived directly by the eyes, is direct knowledge. One of the words Niścaldās uses for "direct" is simply "perceptual"; *pratyakṣa*,

which literally means “before the eyes,” is sometimes translated as sense-perception, but technically it should be translated only as “perception,” since it includes means of knowledge which are not dependent on the senses. For example, many schools of Indian philosophy admit a special kind of super-sensual perception known as yogic perception. Interestingly, Niścaldās never discusses this kind of perception in *The Ocean of Inquiry*, and this helps to underscore my point that liberation comes about, on Niścaldās’s view, through ordinary means of knowledge.

The word for “indirect” is *parokṣa*, which shares a root with *pratyakṣa* and which literally means “beyond the eyes.” Indirect awareness is awareness of things that are distant, so to speak, things that cannot be grasped directly or without mediation. Adding a negative prefix to *parokṣa* yields the word *aparokṣa*, “not indirect,” i.e. “direct, unmediated”; this is the most common word for direct awareness (*aparokṣa-jñāna*) in Advaita Vedānta, perhaps to avoid confusion with *pratyakṣa* in the sense of the first of the six means of knowledge.

All Advaita Vedāntins are agreed that indirect awareness of Brahman does not suffice to liberate us; there must be direct awareness. How, then, do we achieve this direct awareness? Sense-perception (*pratyakṣa*), almost by definition, produces direct/perceptual awareness (*pratyakṣa-jñāna*). But Niścaldās is quick to point out that this means of knowledge cannot lead to liberation, because Brahman is beyond the range of the senses. Near the end of Tattvadrṣṭi’s dialogue with the guru, the disciple asks:

[4.117] Apart from connection with the sense-organs, how, O lord, can there be the direct (*pratyakṣa*) Awareness “I am Brahman”? Please explain [this] to me.<sup>347</sup>

The commentary on this verse then explains how each of the five senses in turn fails to grasp Brahman. How, then, is a direct, “perceptual” knowledge of Brahman possible? The guru

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<sup>347</sup> VS p. 115.

explains to Tattvadr̥ṣṭi (in verse 4.118) that there is no rule (*niyama*) that direct awareness always requires connection with the sense organs; he offers the counter-example of our perception of pleasure and pain, which is direct but which does not depend on any sense-organs.

The commentary to this verse gives a helpful definition of direct awareness, which is worth unpacking carefully: “One speaks of *direct awareness* when an object is connected with a *vr̥tti*. When there is no such connection, because the object is external and is either distant, past, or future, and an inward *vr̥tti* bearing the form of the object has arisen through inference or testimony, then one speaks of *indirect awareness*.”<sup>348</sup> Here directness is defined in terms of “connection” (*saṃbandha*) of a *vr̥tti* with its object. Specifically, the object must (a) exist in the present and (b) not be too far removed in order to be connected with the *vr̥tti*, as occurs in the case of sense-perception. When, through either inference or verbal testimony, a *vr̥tti* takes as its object something that no longer exists, or has not yet existed, or is too far away to perceive directly, then, even though the *vr̥tti* bears a form (*ākāra*) of the object, the awareness is still indirect.

Elsewhere in *The Ocean of Inquiry* (in a discussion focusing on moral training rather than epistemology), Nīścaldās gives us a hint of the practical importance of the distinction between direct and indirect awareness: it is this distinction, he tells us, that accounts for the difference between the passionate attachments of ordinary people and the dispassion of a sage. A sage, or liberated person, has direct knowledge of the “falseness” of objects, Nīścaldās explains; the sage directly knows that objects are not ultimately real but are instead like dream-objects, and therefore are not the proper objects of desire. Nīścaldās writes, “Although the ignorant might

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<sup>348</sup> VS 4.118 comm., p. 120.

also know the falseness [of objects] through the *śāstras* and [through] reasoning, nevertheless the direct perception (*mati*) that objects are false occurs only to one possessed of [liberating] knowledge, not to the ignorant.”<sup>349</sup> Why does the knowledge of the sage make such a difference in his life, while the knowledge of an ordinary person remains ineffective? It is because the sage’s knowledge is direct, while ordinary people have only indirect knowledge to go on.

Nīścaldās goes on to analyze what might be termed an “epistemic conflict” experienced by ordinary people: “The indirect perception of the falseness of objects which the ignorant experience does not remove the direct error of [perceiving them as] real.”<sup>350</sup> That is to say, there is a conflict between two sources of knowledge, or more accurately, between a valid source of knowledge and an apparent source of knowledge. This conflict results in a sort of “cognitive dissonance,” rendering the valid source of knowledge ineffective as a guide to action. On the one hand, there is the awareness that objects are false (an awareness that arises through inference or testimony); on the other hand, there is the awareness that they are real. What is worse, for ordinary people the source of the latter awareness is, apparently, sense-perception, which produces direct awareness. And whenever there is an epistemic conflict, direct awareness trumps indirect awareness. Nīścaldās explains: “Thus, when the ignorant [feel] dispassionate towards an object, although there is at that time an indirect perception of [the] falseness [of the object], still the direct perception of [its] reality is stronger than the indirect perception of [its] falseness. Hence the indirect perception of falseness that the ignorant have is not the cause of dispassion. Rather, through the strong (*prabala*) perception of

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<sup>349</sup> VS 6B.14 comm., p. 249. —The distinction between direct and indirect knowledge as Nīścaldās uses it here might usefully be compared to the Platonic distinction between knowledge and opinion. Opinions, even if they are true, do not have the transformative character of knowledge, a direct vision of reality.

<sup>350</sup> VS 6B.14 comm., p. 249.

[the] reality [of the object], a passion for the object arises.”<sup>351</sup> In the same passage, Niścaldās goes on to add: “And what dispassion does arise is not a result of the perception of falseness, but of seeing [some] fault in the object.” That is to say, a person might perceive that a given object is not as desirable as it appears; but the person has not yet realized that the object—and all objects—are ultimately unreal. By contrast, the sage is one who has not just an indirect but a direct perception of the unreality of objects: “One possessed of knowledge knows, in a direct way, all of manifestation to be false.”<sup>352</sup> Niścaldās immediately goes on to explain: “This direct perception of falseness removes the direct perception of reality. ... One will not again perceive as real a thing one has directly known to be false. Just as one does not again perceive as real a snake in a rope once one has directly known it to be false, likewise the sage does not again perceive [objects] as real.”

Niścaldās gives two other examples of epistemic conflict elsewhere in *The Ocean of Inquiry*, in the context of a discussion of ritual activity. *Karmas* (here in the sense of Vedic rites), he explains, are performed for the sake of results expected in a future life, and the one who performs them must therefore believe that he is distinct from his body, since the body does not survive after death. Yet the very same people who “know” that they are distinct from their bodies identify themselves with their bodies all the time, regarding themselves as possessed of a particular caste and station in life, attributes which pertain to the body but not to the self. How is it possible for them to hold two contradictory views? Niścaldās accepts that the cognitive dissonance is real, and he attributes it to competing sources of knowledge:

The doer of *karmas* does not have a direct awareness of the self as different from his body. Rather, he has indirect awareness through the *śāstras*, while his awareness of the self as his body is direct. Were there direct awareness of the self as different from the body, it would be opposed

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<sup>351</sup> VS 6B.14 comm., p. 249.

<sup>352</sup> VS 6B.14 comm., p. 249.

to the direct awareness of the self as the body; indirect awareness, however, cannot oppose direct awareness. Hence the awareness of the self as a doer, different from the body, and the perception of the self as the body can both be held by a single person.<sup>353</sup>

The *śāstras* teach that the soul survives the body, but this teaching produces only indirect awareness. One can read or hear this teaching without it overturning the habitual identification with one's body, which is founded on a direct awareness.

Nīscaldās goes on to give a second example of cognitive dissonance, though in this case the conflict is harmless. "Through the *śāstras*," he says, "there is an indirect awareness of the Lord as an image (*mūrti*), while the perception of stone is direct. They are not opposed. Both can occur to a single person."<sup>354</sup> Saints might see images differently, perhaps, but ordinary people perceive just a statue carved from stone; it is only through the indirect testimony of scripture that one knows the stone to embody a divine presence. Nīscaldās concludes this section with a direct statement of the rule which, to this point, had only been implied: "The following rule is established: direct error is opposed [only] by direct knowledge, not by indirect knowledge."<sup>355</sup>

Two rules of epistemic conflict are implied in these passages:

1. When direct and indirect sources of awareness conflict, direct awareness trumps indirect awareness.
2. When two direct sources of awareness conflict, veridical awareness trumps non-veridical awareness.

Let us now see how these rules might help us solve the puzzle of Tattvadr̥ṣṭi. One might be tempted to think that the first rule on its own is enough to explain the progression Tattvadr̥ṣṭi goes through in the course of his dialogue with his guru. As a *prima facie* view, one might

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<sup>353</sup> VS 6B.10 comm., p. 238.

<sup>354</sup> VS 6B.10 comm., p. 238.

<sup>355</sup> VS 6B.10 comm., p. 238.



suggest that when the guru first tells Tattvadr̥ṣṭi “You are Brahman,” the initial result is an indirect awareness, an awareness trumped by Tattvadr̥ṣṭi’s direct awareness of external objects and his own experiences of pleasure and pain. By the end of the chapter, however, Tattvadr̥ṣṭi’s indirect awareness has been transformed into a direct awareness of his true nature. One might even appeal to the rope/snake analogy to support this *prima facie* view: the guru’s utterance of the *mahāvākya* could be compared to a person in a dark forest being told, “Don’t worry, that thing that looks like a snake over there is really a rope.” The indirect awareness produced by these words might not be sufficient to trump one’s initial direct awareness of a snake, especially if one has an intense fear of snakes. Once one gets a little closer or shines a light on the “snake,” however, one would realize directly the truth of what one had been told, and the illusion would not arise again.

This solution to the puzzle of Tattvadr̥ṣṭi might seem compelling, but Nīścaldās would most certainly reject it. While it is tempting to think of verbal testimony as producing only indirect awareness, for Nīścaldās (as for the earlier Advaitins he follows on this point), testimony in fact can give rise either to direct or indirect knowledge, depending on whether the object described is “distant” or “near.” Whenever the scriptures speak about things like heaven or gods such as Indra, which are beyond our experience, they produce only indirect knowledge. However, when they speak about our very selves, which are supremely proximate to us, they can indeed produce direct knowledge, if they use first- or second-person language. Nīścaldās uses the famous analogy of the “tenth man.” Ten travellers cross a dangerous river, and when they get to the other side, they count themselves to see whether everyone made it across safely. Each one forgets to count himself, however, so they count only nine and think that someone must have drowned. If someone comes along and says to one of them, “The

tenth person made it across,” this produces an indirect knowledge (since one still does not know who the tenth is). If, however, the person points to one of the travellers and says, “You are the tenth,” this statement produces direct knowledge. This, according to Nīścaldās, is still a case of verbal testimony; and this, he tells us, is precisely how liberating knowledge of Brahman operates.<sup>356</sup>

The statements of the Vedas, Nīścaldās explains, can be divided into two main classes: there are those that tell us about things beyond our experience (heaven, the results of sacrifices, etc.); these are perfectly reliable, but they produce only indirect knowledge. Then there are the statements of the Vedas (from the Upanishads) that teach us about the nature of Brahman and our selves (which are ultimately identical). These statements in turn can be subdivided into two classes, depending on whether they produce direct or indirect knowledge. Third-person statements of the “Brahman exists” or “Brahman is such-and-such” variety produce indirect knowledge. First- and second-person statements such as “I am Brahman,” or “You are that,” however, produce direct knowledge. These are the statements known as *mahāvākyas*, or the “Great Sayings” of the Vedas. The other class of statements, which produce only indirect knowledge, are known as *avāntara-vākyas*, or “(Inter)mediate Sayings” of the Vedas. The Great Sayings, as Nīścaldās makes clear on many occasions, are the direct means to liberation, because they produce direct, liberating knowledge of our identity with Brahman.

According to Nīścaldās, there are thus three ways of bringing about direct knowledge, only one of which yields knowledge of Brahman: (1) Sense-perception yields direct knowledge of sense-objects, but not of Brahman. (2) The perception of inward states such as pleasure and pain produces direct knowledge of those states, but again, not of Brahman. (3) Finally, there is

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<sup>356</sup> See VS 1.23 comm., pp. 14-15.

verbal testimony which reveals the nature of the self through a *mahāvākya*; this is the kind of knowledge Nīścaldās is interested in, and all of the other epistemological discussions are auxiliary to it; he discusses perception, the other *pramāṇas*, and the whole framework of knowing precisely so as to explain how it is that one can come to this knowledge, and hence to liberation. Nīścaldās affirms:

“You are Brahman”: as soon as this statement, pronounced by the teacher, reaches the ear of the hearer, there is the direct awareness, “I am Brahman.”<sup>357</sup>

But now, it seems, we are back where we started! If simply hearing the statement “You are Brahman” immediately produces the direct awareness “I am Brahman,” and this awareness is what liberates, then why is Tattvadṛṣṭi not liberated when the guru first says this to him, way back in verse 32 near the very beginning of their dialogue?

We have seen that the first rule of epistemic conflict (“direct awareness trumps indirect awareness”) is insufficient to solve the puzzle. What about the second rule? In order to trump a direct, non-veridical awareness, what is needed is a direct, veridical awareness. We know that the guru’s words to Tattvadṛṣṭi *should* be producing such an awareness, but we see that they do not. Although the words of the *mahāvākya* do produce a direct awareness in Tattvadṛṣṭi, this awareness does not yet amount to *knowledge*. The question to ask is: what keeps his direct awareness from being a case of knowledge? In other words, why is the *pramāṇa* producing *jñāna* but not yet *pramā*? The answer to this question lies in one final epistemological distinction, with which I will conclude this chapter: the distinction between strong, or “firm,” (*dṛḍha*) awareness and weak, or “slack” (*manda*), awareness.

The distinction between strong and weak awareness, which turns out to be essential for solving the puzzle of Tattvadṛṣṭi, comes up only in chapter 6 of *The Ocean of Inquiry*, and not

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<sup>357</sup> VS 1.23 comm., pp. 13.

where one would expect it: the context is a discussion of whether ritual and meditative practices (*karma* and *upāsanā*) are useful for seekers of liberation. Niścaldās defines strong and weak awareness as follows: “The established position is that there are two kinds of awareness: weak and strong. Awareness accompanied by doubt etc. is known as weak awareness, while awareness free of doubt etc. is known as strong [awareness].”<sup>358</sup> Significantly, Niścaldās does not use the word *jñāna* for awareness here, but the word *bodha*, which could also be translated as knowledge. It can be used as a synonym for *jñāna*, but in this context the term carries the connotation not just of any awareness but of the kind of awareness which leads to liberation or “enlightenment,” as *bodha* is sometimes translated. That Niścaldās is using the distinction to treat the problem of liberation is clear in what immediately follows: “He who has strong (lit. firm, *dr̥ḍha*) awareness does not have the least thing to do. Awareness in the form of a *vṛtti* of the inner faculty which is free of doubt etc., once it has arisen even once, destroys ignorance. Even when the awareness itself is no more, by no means does error again arise within the realized self.”<sup>359</sup> Thus, a firm awareness of the form “I am Brahman,” leads in a single instant, through an irreversible operation, to liberation.<sup>360</sup> A single thought is what liberates, and the whole purpose of Vedānta, for Niścaldās, boils down to creating the conditions for this liberating thought to arise.

Niścaldās warns that weak awareness—a would-be knowledge hindered by epistemic conflict—is a fragile thing. Engaging in action can destroy a weak awareness, because it gives strength to the erroneous but directly perceived sense of the self as a body, a doer, etc.

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<sup>358</sup> VS 6B.10 comm., p. 241. —I will discuss the significance of the “etc.” in my next chapter.

<sup>359</sup> VS 6B.10 comm., p. 241.

<sup>360</sup> There is a longstanding debate within Buddhism about whether enlightenment comes about gradually or suddenly (see Gregory 1987 and Ruegg 1989); Niścaldās’s sympathies would lie squarely on the subitist side.

Niścaldās gives an interesting example of a baby bird in an egg: the mother-bird sits on the egg during the early stages of gestation, but once the wings are formed within the egg, the mother-bird no longer sits on the egg; the heat would cause the fragile wings to dissolve. Likewise, he says, the practice of *karmas* and *upāsanās* is helpful in the early stages of the spiritual path, but once a weak awareness—like wings early in their formation—has arisen, one must be careful not to lose it through engaging in *karmas* etc. Niścaldās then gives us a hint of the central role of inquiry on the path to liberation: “Concerning a person in whose mind there sometimes occurs the doubt: ‘Is the self absolutely unattached, or is [it] not?’, if he repeatedly reflects on the truth (*artha*) that ‘The self is unattached; there is not the slightest thing I need to do,’ then, doubt having been removed, strong awareness will arise. [But] if he should perform *karmas* and *upāsanās*, then the weak awareness that has [already] arisen will be removed and the erroneous ascertainment ‘I am a doer [and] enjoyer’ will arise.”<sup>361</sup> Certain practices that are wholesome and even necessary at an earlier stage must therefore be set aside once one sets out on the way of knowledge.

How does the distinction between strong and weak awareness help us solve the puzzle of Tattvadr̥ṣṭi? On Niścaldās’s view, the guru’s initial words to Tattvadr̥ṣṭi do produce in him a direct awareness of his true nature; this awareness is “weakened,” however, by the kinds of epistemic conflict described above: by the thought “I am a doer,” by the perception of external objects as real, and by a host of similar instances of awareness, all of which lead Tattvadr̥ṣṭi to doubt the guru’s teaching. I say “doubt” and not “disbelieve,” because he still trusts the guru, and as a result he is faced with a state of epistemic conflict. On this view, it is the *removal* of this conflict that, by the end of the chapter, allows Tattvadr̥ṣṭi to find liberation. Once

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<sup>361</sup> VS 6B.10 comm., p. 245.

Tattvadṛṣṭi is free of doubts, the words of the Veda are able to function as they should, creating in the mind a *ṛtti* of the form “I am Brahman.” This *ṛtti*, owing to its *sāttvika* nature, serves as a mirror reflecting the light of pure consciousness and removing in a single instant the veil of ignorance that had previously covered the self.

I began this chapter by asking whether the kind of knowledge that leads to liberation should be thought of as a mystical insight existing in a class of its own, or whether it is comparable to everyday kinds of knowledge. I hope the foregoing has made it clear that for Nīścaldās, the kind of knowledge that liberates is indeed comparable to everyday kinds of knowledge. What brings about liberation is not the pure awareness of Brahman as such, but rather a *ṛtti*, a temporary “thought” existing within the individual mind, produced by means of verbal testimony. This continuity between everyday cognitions and liberative cognition is made possible, I have argued, because for Nīścaldās the mind itself, in its very substance, is made to reflect the light of pure consciousness and remove the darkness of ignorance.

I have also argued that the solution to the puzzle of Tattvadṛṣṭi lies in Nīścaldās’s distinction between “weak” and “strong” awareness, and that the one is transformed into the other by removing the doubts to which epistemic conflict gives rise. It is worth stressing that for Nīścaldās, the key difference is not between “theoretical” or “academic” knowledge and “experiential” knowledge, but rather between doubtful and doubt-free awareness. If the words “You are Brahman” do not liberate, it means that at some level one doubts that they are true. The question then becomes: how are doubts removed? This is the question to which we will turn in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 5

### The Path to Liberation

*Restatement of the problem - Qualifications for the study of Vedānta - Śravaṇa, manana, and nididhyāsana - The meaning and process of inquiry - The role of nididhyāsana - The mirror of the mind: An illuminating passage from the Vṛtti-prabhākar - Remaining questions - Conclusions*

#### *Restatement of the problem*

In a 2003 book review in the *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, John Taber raises several pointed questions about the details of how exactly liberation is supposed to come about in Advaita Vedānta. His central question is: “[W]hat is the change that takes place that converts a mediate knowledge of the self—the mere intellectual understanding ‘I am Brahman,’ which makes no difference in my life—into a direct, life-transforming realization, and how do the various practices that Śaṅkara mentions throughout his works but never really explains or connects together, contribute to it?”<sup>362</sup> From what we covered in the last chapter, we can see that Nīścaldās would not accept the wording of the question: what is needed is not a conversion of indirect knowledge into direct knowledge, but the “strengthening,” by way of a resolution of epistemic conflict, of an already direct awareness into direct knowledge. Nonetheless, with this qualification in place, Taber’s two-part question provides a convenient restatement of the puzzle set forth at the beginning of the last chapter: why is Tattvadṛṣṭi not liberated upon first hearing the words “You are Brahman”? The last chapter focused on the first part of Taber’s question: what is the nature of the change that takes place between Tattvadṛṣṭi’s initial awareness, which does not liberate, and his liberating awareness at the end of his dialogue with the guru? The present chapter will focus on the second part of Taber’s question: what are the various practices that lead to this change, and how are these practices

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<sup>362</sup> P. 695.

related to each other? In other words, what is Niścaldās's understanding of the path to liberation?

Taber concludes with the suggestion that his question might be unanswerable: "This, I would maintain, is what we, as scholars outside the tradition, do not yet, and indeed may never, understand."<sup>363</sup> If he means we may never understand Śaṅkara's position (assuming it to be different from the positions of his later followers), he is right; but then neither would those inside the tradition (insofar as their positions differ from Śaṅkara's) have any better understanding. If, on the other hand, Taber means that the tradition of Advaita Vedānta simply does not have an answer to give, apart from experiencing liberation for oneself, I would disagree. Much of the intellectual history of Advaita Vedānta after the time of Śaṅkara can be understood as attempts to answer questions that Śaṅkara himself, whether intentionally or unintentionally, left unanswered. Both parts of Taber's question have been explicitly addressed by post-Śaṅkara thinkers, and a variety of answers given. Here, building on the epistemology discussed in the last chapter, I hope to outline Niścaldās's answer.

Much of the ground to be covered in this chapter will be familiar to students and scholars of Advaita Vedānta. In particular, it will be necessary to discuss the classical list of qualifications (*adhikāra*) for seekers of liberation, and to examine the threefold method of hearing (*śravaṇa*), reflection (*manana*), and contemplation (*nididhyāsana*). But I will also suggest something new, in emphasis if not in content: that for Niścaldās, once the preliminary qualifications have been met, the most important goal on the path to liberation is *the removal of doubt*; and doubts are removed through the practice of *inquiry*. My main argument in this chapter is that inquiry, understood as a dialectical process in which doubts are raised and then

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<sup>363</sup> P. 695.



resolved, is the central practice for those seeking liberation in life. Inquiry is precisely what allows for the transformation of Tattvadr̥ṣṭi's initially "weak" awareness ("I am Brahman") into liberating knowledge.

#### *Qualifications for the study of Vedānta*

There is a paradox in the intended audience of Nīścaldās's work. On the one hand, *The Ocean of Inquiry* clearly aims to make Vedāntic teachings available to a wider audience than would be able to study Sanskrit works. The relatively lucid language of the text, its definitions of technical terms, its frequent repetition of key ideas, and its intentional avoidance of quotations from Sanskrit works (including the Vedas) all seem to suggest that *The Ocean of Inquiry* was intended as a popularizing work; and in point of fact, we know that the text *did* help popularize Vedāntic teachings, in itself and through its translations into regional languages across India. On the other hand, Nīścaldās himself makes it clear that his ideal audience is quite small. After spelling out the various qualifications a student of the work is supposed to have—including detachment from sense-pleasures, tranquility of mind, etc.—Nīścaldās has an opponent object: "Such a person is hard to find. Seeing that one lacks these qualifications, no one will study this work."<sup>364</sup> He replies: "Do you mean that not many people are qualified, or that no one at all is qualified?" Nīścaldās says he quite agrees that very few people are qualified, but that does not mean no one at all possesses the necessary qualifications.<sup>365</sup>

The term used to express the concept I have been translating as "qualifications" is the singular noun *adhikāra*. In (Pūrva-)Mīmāṃsā, *adhikāra* refers to the "qualification" or "right" to

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<sup>364</sup> VS 2.11 comm., p. 36.

<sup>365</sup> VS 2.11 comm., p. 36.

perform certain rituals; if one performs a ritual without having *adhikāra*, it will not have the desired result, even if it is performed flawlessly. One who possesses *adhikāra* is known as an *adhikārin*. To be an *adhikārin* is thus to have fulfilled certain prerequisites (such as having a wife) which, although not part of the ritual proper, are necessary for ritual success—or for other kinds of success, once the notion of *adhikāra* is broadened. In the context of Vedānta (Uttara-Mīmāṃsā), where the success aimed at is intellectual (knowledge of one’s identity with Brahman) rather than ritual, one might translate *adhikārin* as “the qualified student.” In the case of written works, *adhikāra* takes on the additional sense of “audience”: the *adhikārin* is not just the qualified student but also the qualified reader, i.e. the ideal audience, the readers for whom the work is intended. Thus, when Nīścaldās says that someone who is already liberated lacks *adhikāra* to read *The Ocean of Inquiry*, his point is not that sages are unqualified but simply that they are not his audience, since reading his work would serve no purpose for them.

Because Vedāntic authors often treat *adhikāra* only in a cursory fashion (if at all) at the beginning of their works, it is easy to forget that these works presuppose certain qualities on the part of the reader. This might not make a difference if our intention as scholars studying Vedāntic works is to trace the development of particular ideas or to analyze arguments. But it becomes extremely important when asking questions about the path to liberation. In a sense, every time we study a work of Vedānta, we are starting with the concluding volume of a multi-volume work, the previous “volumes” being the prerequisites entailed by *adhikāra*. If I were to teach an upper-level course on late Advaita Vedānta, with readings in Sanskrit, I would not get very far unless the students had already studied Sanskrit and had some prior knowledge of Hinduism and Indian philosophy. I could try teaching them the material all the same, but they would not come away *knowing* what I wanted them to know. Similarly, anyone can pick up

Niścaldās's text, but on his view, one will not come away from it with a liberating knowledge of Brahman unless one has satisfied certain prerequisites.

What is significant—and perhaps puzzling, on some views of how knowledge comes about—is that these prerequisites are not simply “intellectual” but also “moral” in a broad sense I will discuss momentarily. In the case of my hypothetical course on Vedānta, for the students to come away knowing the material, there are certain things they must already *know*. The prerequisites are intellectual. For better or for worse, there are no *moral* prerequisites to taking such a course. A student who behaves like a jerk outside of class has just as much right to take the course as a student who behaves virtuously, and he or she also has just as much chance of mastering the material and succeeding in the course. Or so we normally think: in fact, there are at least some non-intellectual and even moral prerequisites for succeeding in the course. For example, a student must care about learning the material (or at least about passing the course) in the first place, and it is not obvious that this disposition is purely intellectual. Second, doing well in a university course requires diligence instead of laziness. Third, certain skills are required which, while auxiliary to the acquiring of knowledge, do not themselves constitute knowledge: for example, one must possess sufficient powers of concentration to read difficult texts.

The non-intellectual dimension—which, as I have suggested, is to some degree prerequisite even in “secular” studies, since even cruel and selfish people must, in order to succeed academically, be possessed of motivation, diligence, and the ability to concentrate—becomes all the more important in Niścaldās's system, for two reasons. First, knowledge of one's identity with Brahman is the loftiest knowledge possible, and its subject-matter can be

exceedingly difficult (Niścaldās calls it “exceedingly subtle” [*atisūkṣma*]<sup>366</sup>); moreover, there are many obstacles that might lead students to give up before “mastering” the material. Second, as discussed in the last chapter, while awareness in the absolute sense—the pure consciousness of Brahman—does not depend on anything, particular instances of knowledge are not pure, rarified essences; rather, they are particular transformations of the mind, a mind which is itself “material.” In the last chapter, we saw that for knowledge to arise, the quality of *sattva* must predominate; when the qualities of *rajas* and *tamas* predominate, knowledge will not arise. Again, if this is true even of everyday knowledge of external objects, to which our minds are accustomed, it is all the more true of knowledge of the inward self, which we are not accustomed to focus our attention on. These two points—first, the subtlety of the subject-matter and second, the need for a “pure” mind even in ordinary acts of knowing—will help us situate the classical list of prerequisites in Advaita Vedānta.

Niścaldās in fact seems to have two systems of understanding *adhikāra*, which I will refer to as the “four-means” system and the “three-faults” system. The four-means system is the standard or received view, which appears already in Śaṅkara and which is perhaps best known through its clear exposition in Sadānanda’s *Vedānta-sāra*. According to this system of explaining *adhikāra*, students of Vedānta must possess four *sādhana*s, or “means,” before setting out on the path to liberation. The first means is discrimination (*viveka*), which Niścaldās defines as the knowledge (*jñāna*) that the self is imperishable and unchanging while the world is not. The second means is detachment (*virāga*), or more literally “dispassion,” defined by Niścaldās as renunciation of all pleasures, even those of the world of Brahmā. The third means, known as “attainment of the six” (*ṣaḍ-sampatti*), refers to a list of six qualities: tranquility,

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<sup>366</sup> VS 7.16 comm., p. 291.

restraint, faith, abstention, concentration, and endurance. The fourth means is the desire for liberation (*mumukṣutā*).<sup>367</sup>

Niścaldās does not simply repeat this classical list, however. Instead, he adds to it—or contextualizes it, depending on how one interprets his position—by discussing three “faults” (*doṣas*) to which the mind is subject. Below I translate his opening verse from the section on *adhikāra* (in VS chapter 1), together with the commentary:

[1.11] He in whom there is neither impurity (*mala*) nor instability (*vikṣepa*), but ignorance (*āvaraṇa*) only,  
And who is possessed of the four means (*sādhana*s), such a discerning one is qualified.

**Commentary:** There are three faults within the mind (*antaḥ-karaṇa*). The first is impurity, the second is instability, and the third is ignorance. The fault of impurity in the mind is removed through selfless action (*niṣkāma-karma*). The fault of instability is removed through meditation (*upāsanā*). The fault of ignorance is removed through knowledge. He who has undertaken selfless action and meditation and has thereby removed the faults of impurity and instability, [but] in whose mind there is [still] ignorance—i.e., concealment of his true nature—and who is possessed of the four means, such a one is qualified.<sup>368</sup>

Niścaldās never explains how the four-means system and the three-faults system are related, but there seems to be an overlap.<sup>369</sup> For example, it is difficult to imagine someone performing *karmas* selflessly (or more literally “without desires,” *niṣkāma*) unless the person also possesses detachment (*virāga*). Likewise, it is difficult to imagine someone possessing concentration (*samādhāna*, one of the six attainments included in the third means) unless one has overcome mental instability/scattering (*vikṣepa*).<sup>370</sup> Niścaldās does not explain how the four means themselves are to be attained, but he does tell us how the three faults are removed: *karmas*

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<sup>367</sup> VS 1.11-21, pp. 4-7.

<sup>368</sup> VS 1.11 and comm., p. 4.

<sup>369</sup> The relation of the three-faults system and the four-means system points to the limits of Niścaldās’s interest in “systematic” thought: he seems neither troubled by, nor interested in, the question of how they relate. It is worth noting, however, that the four-means system is inherited, and an exposition of it would have been expected; moreover, he *only* discusses it here in the first chapter. By contrast, the three-faults system is a frame of reference he returns to again and again, which suggests that it is more central to his thought.

<sup>370</sup> In fact, Niścaldās specifically defines concentration as “the destruction of instability” (*bicsep* [i.e. *vikṣepa*] *ko nās*) at VS 1.17 (p. 5).

remove the fault of mental impurity; *upāsanās* remove the fault of mental instability; and knowledge removes the fault of ignorance.

What is the point of requiring that students of Vedānta meet these prerequisites? We saw in the last chapter that for Nīścaldās, liberating knowledge consists of the direct, doubt-free awareness, “I am Brahman,” which is produced by hearing a *mahāvākya* such as “You are Brahman.” Why should seemingly non-intellectual qualities such as detachment or tranquility be necessary for attaining this kind of knowledge? In other words, is there a link between the notion of *adhikāra* and the epistemology sketched in the last chapter? Once again, we have a question that Nīścaldās himself neither asks nor answers, though I will argue that there are resources in his thought for answering the question.

Neither the four-means system nor the three-means system makes much sense when viewed solely in the light of “instrumental epistemology.” The *mahāvākya* produces the awareness “I am Brahman” in the minds of all who hear it, whether or not they have spent years (or lifetimes) performing rituals, practicing meditation, acquiring tranquility, etc. The notion of *adhikāra* begins to make much more sense, however, in the light of what I have been calling “material epistemology.” Knowledge involves not just an instrumental cause (the means of knowledge) but also a material cause (the mind), and in order for knowledge to arise, both must be functioning properly; in other words, both must be free of “faults” (*doṣa*). We know that the *mahāvākya*, consisting as it does of a true and reliable statement from the Vedas, is a valid means of knowledge and hence is free of faults, but what about the mind? What does it mean for the mind to be free of faults?

Nīścaldās’s “three-faults” system addresses this last question directly. To quote him again: “There are three faults within the mind. The first is impurity, the second is instability,

and the third is ignorance.” Niścaldās says that a qualified student is one whose mind is free of impurity and instability, though not of ignorance. As we shall see below, ignorance is removed through knowledge, and hence through intellectual means. For now I will focus on the first two faults, which prevent knowledge from arising, but which cannot be removed through intellectual means but only through practices of purification<sup>371</sup> and meditation. So we can rephrase the question about the relationship of *adhikāra* and epistemology as follows: why should it be necessary to undertake practices of purification and meditation before studying Vedānta? How do these non-intellectual practices contribute to the arising of knowledge?

I would argue that the answer again lies in Niścaldās’s material epistemology. For Niścaldās, the mind is essentially composed of the quality of *sattva*, which is clear and “reflective” by nature. Knowledge arises when the mind, in the form of a *vṛtti*, reflects the light of pure consciousness. When the mind is overwhelmed by the qualities of *tamas* or *rajas*, however, its ability to reflect this light will be obscured. On my interpretation of Niścaldās, practices of purification and meditation are necessary to subdue the qualities of *tamas* and *rajas*, respectively, in order to allow the mind to function in accordance with its true, *sāttvika* nature. “Only an object that is pure (*svaccha*) is fit for reflection,” Niścaldās writes elsewhere in *The Ocean of Inquiry*, “while an object that is impure (*malina*) is not.”<sup>372</sup> In context, Niścaldās is getting at the difference between minds, which are capable of reflecting consciousness, and inanimate objects such as pots, which are not. But the distinction is just as useful in understanding the significance of *adhikāra*. Just as knowledge cannot arise in a pot because of

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<sup>371</sup> In the passage quoted above, Niścaldās mentions only *niṣkāma-karma* as the means for purifying the mind, but elsewhere he also mentions bathing in the Ganges, reciting God’s name, “etc.” as means of removing impurity (VS 2.8 comm., p. 30); hence I will refer not just to the performance of *karmas* but to “practices of purification” more generally.

<sup>372</sup> VS 4.116 comm., p. 113.

its *tāmasa* nature, which renders it “impure” (*malina*), so too knowledge cannot arise in a mind in which *tamas* predominates. The “impurity” of the mind must be removed in order for *sattva* to give rise to knowledge.

If practices of purification are necessary to subdue the quality of *tamas*, practices of meditation are necessary to subdue the quality of *rajas*. In fact, Niścaldās specifically defines *rajas* as “having the nature of projection/scattering (*vikṣepa*),”<sup>373</sup> which is the very term I translated as “instability” in the context of *adhikāra*. Once the qualities of *tamas* and *rajas* have both been subdued, the quality of *sattva* can function without hindrance, giving rise to knowledge. On this interpretation, Niścaldās’s three-fault system of qualifications is directly connected to his epistemology.

What about the four-means system? Niścaldās himself describes the four *sādhana*s as “indirect means to knowledge,” insofar as possessing them prepares one for the path to liberation proper. Let us briefly consider each in turn, with an eye to how exactly they might prepare the mind for the arising of liberating knowledge. The first *sādhana*, which is described as the root of all the others, is itself defined in terms of knowledge: discernment is an *awareness* (*jñāna*) of the self as imperishable and unchanging, in contrast to the world. The second *sādhana*, detachment, could be interpreted as the subduing of *rajas* within the mind; elsewhere Niścaldās explains that desires (*icchā*) are forms of *rajas*.<sup>374</sup> The third *sādhana*, “attainment of the six,” could also be connected to the subduing of *rajas*. Four of the six qualities—tranquility,

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<sup>373</sup> VS 5.156 comm., p. 152.

<sup>374</sup> VS 6B.9a comm., p. 226. —It is interesting to note that in Mīmāṃsā, the desire for particular “fruits” (e.g., rebirth in heaven) is what prompts an *adhikārin* to perform rituals, whereas here, it is the *absence* of desires that constitutes *adhikāra*. When Niścaldās defines detachment as “abandoning (*tyāga*) all pleasures, even up to the world of Brahṁā” (VS 1.14, p. 5), there is doubtless an allusion to the need for *karma-tyāga*, the abandoning of rituals (at least insofar as they are performed with the desire to experience their fruits). An allusion to *karma-tyāga* could also be read into Niścaldās’s gloss—in his definition of discernment—of “unchanging” as “devoid of actions” (*kriyā-rahita*): one who possesses discernment recognizes that the self is beyond the sphere of *karma*.



restraint, abstention, and concentration—could be viewed as yogic or meditative attainments; they seem to correspond clearly to the requirement, in the three-fault system, for eliminating the fault of instability. Even apart from the notion of *rajas*, this requirement makes good sense on Niścaldās’s epistemology: most acts of knowledge involve *vṛttis* directed at external objects, but in order for the *mahāvākya* to create the liberating knowledge of Brahman, it must give rise to an “inwardly oriented” (*antar-mukha*) *vṛtti*, and this presupposes a degree of inward focus. The mind requires training to overcome its habitual tendency to dwell on outward objects. Specifically, one needs the qualities of (1) tranquility (*śama*) and (2) restraint (*dama*), which Niścaldās defines as keeping the mind and the senses, respectively, in check from external objects. The quality of (3) abstention (*uparāma*) overlaps both with detachment and with tranquility and restraint, while the quality of (4) concentration (*samādhāna*) is defined outright as “the removal of [mental] instability.”<sup>375</sup> The remaining two qualities, (5) endurance and (6) faith, can also be interpreted as playing a role in preparing the mind for knowledge. Endurance is relatively outward: it refers to the ability to endure physical discomfort such as heat, cold, hunger, and thirst; this, too, can be interpreted as a prerequisite to stability of mind. (Imagine trying to pay attention to an afternoon lecture in the height of summer without the aid of air-conditioning, and one will see, again, the connection between “instrumental” and “material” epistemology!) The quality of faith (*śraddhā*), which is defined as “belief (*viśvāsa*) in the truth of what is said in the Vedas and by one’s guru,” is a prerequisite for the proper functioning of *śabda-pramāṇa*, since verbal testimony is only a valid means of knowledge if the source is trustworthy. Finally, there is the fourth *sādhana*, “desire for liberation.” This prerequisite has

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<sup>375</sup> VS 1.17, p. 5.

its parallel in secular studies: without a strong sense of one's goal, one will easily give up when difficulties arise.

Again, it is not clear how exactly the three-faults system and the four-means system are related. One possibility is that while the three-faults system is more elegant theoretically, the four-means system offers a more practical way of discerning whether a student is qualified. It is easier to tell whether, say, a student is able to endure heat and cold without being distracted than to tell whether the student's mind is free of "impurity" and "instability." The classical list could then be viewed as a sort of checklist of observable correlates to the absence of the three faults. Niścaldās himself offers a hint as to such correspondences later in *The Ocean of Inquiry*, in a discussion of the need for abandoning *karmas* and *upāsanās*. He writes: "[As for one] who is not enlightened but who has a strong (*tīvra*) desire to know the self [and does] not [have the desire] for enjoyment, his mind is pure."<sup>376</sup> Here purity of the mind (which corresponds to the removal of the first of the three faults) is connected with (a) a strong desire to know the self and (b) lack of desire for enjoyments. These seem equivalent to the desire for liberation and detachment. It is perhaps too systematic to draw one-for-one correspondences—Niścaldās never does, of course—but there is at least some equivalence between these two qualifications and the removal of the fault of impurity, just as there seems to be a correspondence between the removal of the fault of instability and the six attainments. In any case, the more important scheme for our purposes is the three-faults system, because knowledge, on the epistemology sketched in the last chapter, arises inevitably from a properly functioning *pramāṇa*. The *pramāṇa* does not require any additional *guṇas*, or "virtues," as the Naiyāyikas would have it. Rather, it simply requires the absence of faults. Whatever one makes

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<sup>376</sup> VS 6B.10 comm., p. 243.

of the four-means system, the relevance of the three-faults system of *adhikāra* to Nīścaldās's epistemology is thus clear.

What if one does not possess *adhikāra*? Nīścaldās makes it clear that he views *karma* and *upāsanā* as the two means to attainment of *adhikāra*. In the next chapter I will discuss one further dimension of *adhikāra* which is essential to Nīścaldās's project in *The Ocean of Inquiry*: the existence of *degrees* of qualification. As we will see, Nīścaldās classifies *adhikārins* into three levels: highest, middle, and lowest. My discussion of the path to liberation in this chapter will focus especially on the highest level of *adhikārin*. The middle level of *adhikārin* follows a different path, for reasons I will discuss in the next chapter. Here I will focus on those who are qualified for the path of liberation through hearing, reflection, and contemplation—or in other words, as I will argue in what follows, those who are qualified for the path of liberation through *inquiry*.

Śravaṇa, manana, and nididhyāsana

Once the prerequisites of *adhikāra* are met—either in a previous life or in the current life, Nīścaldās says—one sets out on the path to liberation proper. This path is classically divided into three parts: hearing (*śravaṇa*), reflection (*manana*), and contemplation (*nididhyāsana*).<sup>377</sup> These terms, and the relationships among the three, have been understood in different ways by thinkers within the tradition. I will have occasion to discuss one of the more important differences in the section below on “the role of *nididhyāsana*.” For now, I will focus on Nīścaldās's understanding of the three terms, which he sets forth fairly systematically. He refers to the three together as *jñāna-sādhana*, or the means to knowledge, and he clarifies that

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<sup>377</sup> The *locus classicus* for this division is the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, where the sage Yājñavalkya says to his wife Maitreyī: “The self, O Maitreyī, is to be seen, to be heard, to be reflected upon, to be contemplated” (2.4.5). Note that while I use the literal translation of “hearing” for *śravaṇa*, it also has the broader sense of “study.”

these three *sādhana*s are “direct means” to knowledge, in contrast to the four *sādhana*s (discernment etc.) described in the previous section, which constitute *adhikāra* and which are merely “indirect means.” Those four *sādhana*s simply prepare one for hearing (*śravaṇa*), while the triad of hearing, reflection, and contemplation leads directly to knowledge. This, at any rate, is the position Nīścaldās initially gives. He goes on to explain, however, that if one inquires carefully (*vicār karike*), even hearing, reflection, and contemplation are only indirect means to knowledge. This is key to Nīścaldās’s position: the three so-called means to knowledge (*jñāna-sādhana*) do not actually produce knowledge. Instead, they *remove obstacles* to knowledge. Only a *pramāṇa* can produce knowledge; for Nīścaldās this is an epistemological axiom, as we have seen many times before. Nīścaldās thus reckons the total number of *sādhana*s as eight: (1-4) the four prerequisite *sādhana*s of discernment, detachment, attainment of the six, and desire for liberation; (5-7) the three *sādhana*s of hearing, reflection, and contemplation; and finally (8) the *mahāvākyas*, which are the *pramāṇa* for the liberating knowledge of one’s identity with Brahman.<sup>378</sup>

Advaitins typically include the *mahāvākyas* within *śravaṇa*, not listing them as a separate means. Nīścaldās acknowledges this possibility and explains that *śravaṇa* can be understood in two senses,<sup>379</sup> which I will label “hearing<sub>1</sub>” and “hearing<sub>2</sub>.” Hearing<sub>1</sub> means hearing the *mahāvākya*; this kind of hearing produces knowledge. Hearing<sub>2</sub> means inquiring into the meaning of what one hears; this kind of hearing removes obstacles, we are told, but does not produce knowledge. The triad of hearing, reflection, and contemplation is so well established that Nīścaldās’s move to add a fourth *sādhana* to the list is worth considering

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<sup>378</sup> VS 1.22, p. 7; see also VS 1.23 comm., pp. 8-13.

<sup>379</sup> VS 2.11 comm., p. 35.

carefully. On my interpretation, it points to Nīścaldās's solution to the puzzle of Tattvadr̥ṣṭi: the movement from non-liberating awareness to liberating awareness is not a process of adding something new but of taking things away. The words "You are Brahman" are fully sufficient to produce liberating knowledge; the trick is to remove the various obstacles that prevent the *mahāvākya* from doing its job.

The role of hearing, reflection, and contemplation is thus to remove epistemic obstacles from the mind of the student. As Nīścaldās explains:

These three—hearing, reflection, and contemplation—are not direct means to knowledge; rather, they [serve to] eliminate the faults of the mind, viz., doubt and erroneous inclination.<sup>380</sup>

This short passage is essential for solving the puzzle of Tattvadr̥ṣṭi. From the section on *adhikāra*, discussed above, we know that there are three *doṣas*, or "faults," which prevent the mind from functioning properly and hence giving rise to liberating knowledge. The first is impurity, which is removed through practices of purification undertaken before one enters the path of Vedāntic study. The second fault is instability or mental scattering, which is removed through practices of meditation, again before one enters the intellectual path being considered here. So in principle, a qualified student of Vedānta—as well as a qualified reader of Nīścaldās's text—has only one remaining fault, the "fault of ignorance," which, we are told, is removed through knowledge. Now we know that the *mahāvākya* produces knowledge. Insofar as it does not, there must still be some fault in the mind of the hearer, and sure enough, the passage above describes two faults that block the arising of knowledge: "doubt" and "erroneous inclination." I would suggest that we read these two faults as subdivisions of the more general "fault of ignorance."

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<sup>380</sup> VS 1.23 comm., p. 11.

Doubt is in turn subdivided into doubt concerning the means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*) and doubt concerning the object of knowledge (*prameya*). Here, the means of knowledge refers specifically to the Upanishads (and perhaps even more specifically to the *mahāvākyas*), while the object of knowledge refers to the content of the verbal testimony, namely the identity of self with Brahman. Just as *karmas* were the means for removing impurity and *upāsana*s were the means for removing instability, the triad of hearing, reflection, and contemplation is the means for removing erroneous inclination and the two kinds of doubt. Nīścaldās explains:

“Do the statements in the Upanishads teach about the non-dual Brahman, or do they teach about something else?” This kind of doubt, which concerns the means of knowledge, is removed through **hearing**.

“Is it true that the individual is non-different from Brahman, or is difference real?” This kind of doubt, which concerns the object of knowledge, is removed through **reflection**.

“The body and so forth are real, as is the distinction between the individual and Brahman.” This kind of thought is referred to as erroneous inclination, or straying [from the truth]. It is removed by **contemplation**.<sup>381</sup>

The first point makes it clear that “hearing” in this context does not refer simply to hearing the Upanishads (hearing<sub>1</sub>) but to a more active process of inquiring into their meaning (hearing<sub>2</sub>). This kind of inquiry removes the first kind of doubt, while inquiry into the nature of self and Brahman removes the second kind of doubt. Note the distinction between doubt and erroneous inclination: a doubt always expresses itself through an uncertainty, “Is it X or Y?” By contrast, the erroneous inclination expresses itself as a pseudo-certainty. The discussion of epistemic conflict in the previous chapter can help us understand the close connection between uncertainty and pseudo-certainty: the clash between the certainty of the guru’s teaching and the pseudo-certainty of one’s difference from Brahman produces a state of epistemic conflict, which results in a state of doubt, which in turn prevents the arising of “strong” awareness, or knowledge. The state of doubt, we learn, is removed through the

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<sup>381</sup> VS 1.23 comm., p. 12.

<u>Obstacle</u>	<u>Means for its removal</u>
Impurity	Practices of purification ( <i>niṣkāma-karma, gaṇḍā-snāna</i> , etc.)
Instability	Practices of meditation ( <i>upāsanā</i> )
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Ignorance	
Doubt	
Doubt about the means of knowledge	Hearing <sub>2</sub>
Doubt about the object of knowledge	Reflection
Erroneous inclination	Contemplation

**Figure 2: Obstacles and practices on the path to liberation**

practice of hearing and reflection. Later I will examine at length the question of “contemplation” and its role in removing erroneous inclination. For now let me summarize, with the chart above (figure 2), the scheme of obstacles and the means for their removal. Completion of the practices listed above the dotted line qualifies one for hearing<sub>1</sub>, i.e. for hearing a *mahāvākya*. At the beginning of Tattvadrṣṭi’s dialogue with the guru, he has already reached this stage, but he still has to remove any doubt or erroneous inclination he might have.

Niścaldās defines hearing, reflection, and contemplation as follows:

1. *Hearing* refers to the reasoned ascertainment of the meaning of the statements in the Upanishads.
2. *Reflection* refers to consideration of the non-dual Brahman through reasoning [a] proving the non-difference of the individual and Brahman and [b] refuting difference.
3. *Contemplation* refers to continuous thought of Brahman, without any intervening thought of non-self.<sup>382</sup>

The definitions of hearing and reflection share a common word, *yukti*, which I have tried to indicate in the translation by “reasoned” and “reasoning.” Hearing is the ascertainment of the

<sup>382</sup> VS 1.23 comm., pp. 9-11.

meaning of Vedāntic utterances (*vedānt-vākyan kā tātparya-niścaya*) “through *yukti*” (*yukti saim*); reflection is consideration of the non-dual Brahman (*advitīya-brahm kā cintan*) “through *yuktis*” (*yuktiyoṃ saim*). In both cases, *yukti* is the instrument. This makes sense in light of Niścaldās’s explanation of the purpose of hearing and reflection, which share a common function: they both remove doubts, apparently by means of *yukti*. But what does *yukti* mean?

In the stage of reflection (*manana*), *yukti* seems to refer specifically to arguments, as indicated by the terms *sādhaka* (proving, establishing) and *bādhaka* (refuting, blocking). The meaning of *yukti* in the definition of hearing is less clear. One possible interpretation is that hearing refers to what might be termed “hermeneutics,” with *yukti* then referring to the use of rational interpretive principles for “ascertaining the meaning of Vedāntic statements,” i.e. for interpreting the Upanishads. This is the way the commentator Pītāmbar understands the term *yukti*, which he glosses with a reference to the six established principles (*liṅgas*) of Vedic exegesis.<sup>383</sup> Niścaldās nowhere mentions these six principles, however, and in fact the kinds of doubts that Tattvadrṣṭi and his brothers raise about the Upanishads seldom calls for exegesis,<sup>384</sup> so it is perhaps better to take *yukti* in the broader sense of reasoning. Indeed, all of Niścaldās’s actual techniques for responding to doubts and objections in *The Ocean of Inquiry*—including doubts and objections about how to interpret the Vedas—fall comfortably under this broad category of *yukti* as reasoning. Niścaldās almost never points to proof-texts when responding to doubts and objections; instead, he provides supporting arguments, offers new distinctions in order to remove apparent contradictions, and so on. *Yukti* thus seems to be an

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<sup>383</sup> Viz. *upakrama/upasaṃhāra*, *abhyāsa*, *apūrvatā*, *phala*, *arthavāda*, and *upapatti* (Pītāmbar, gloss 29, VS pp. 9-10). — The *Vedānta-sāra* (sections 182-190) likewise glosses *śravaṇa* as a process of determining meaning through the use of the six *liṅgas* (Nikhilananda 1931, pp. 109-113).

<sup>384</sup> For example, Adrṣṭi and Tarkadrṣṭi both express doubts about how the Vedas can produce knowledge if they are not ultimately real—a question whose answer requires a metaphysical rather than a hermeneutical approach.



over-arching category uniting both hearing and reflection and signifying a “reason”-based treatment of the Upanishads and their teachings, a treatment aimed at the removal of doubts.

There is one final *sādhana* to consider: *The Ocean of Inquiry* itself. In VS chapter 2, Nīścaldās refers to his own work as a “means to liberation.”<sup>385</sup> How does this fit into the scheme of eight *sādhanas* already described? Nīścaldās answers this question directly. He begins by reiterating the distinction between two kinds of “hearing” (*śravaṇa*): hearing<sub>1</sub> he defines as “contact of the ear with the sentences of the Vedas”; hearing<sub>2</sub> he defines as “inquiry (*vicāra*) into the sentences of the Vedānta.”<sup>386</sup> He reminds the reader that knowledge arises from hearing<sub>1</sub>, while hearing<sub>2</sub> is useful for removing doubts about the Upanishads. Nīścaldās summarizes: “In this way, the first kind of hearing is a cause of liberation via knowledge, [while] hearing in the form of inquiry, [together with] reflection and contemplation, are causes of liberation via the removal of doubt and erroneous inclination.”<sup>387</sup> Nīścaldās concludes the discussion by stating that *The Ocean of Inquiry* contributes to liberation in two ways. First, it includes the *mahāvākyas* (in Hindi translation, admittedly, but since the meaning is the same, he says, they still produce knowledge). “Moreover,” he says, “the present work [takes] the form of inquiry and reflection; hence it is a cause of liberation via the removal of the fault of doubt.”<sup>388</sup> In other words, *The Ocean of Inquiry* itself embodies the practices of hearing and reflection. The absence of *nididhyāsana* here is worth noting; I will return to this point later.

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<sup>385</sup> VS 2.11 comm., p. 35 (*jo aisai kahai, granth mokṣ kā sādhan nahīm, so vārtā banai nahīm*) and 36 (*granth mokṣ kā hetu hai*).

<sup>386</sup> VS 2.11 comm., p. 35.

<sup>387</sup> VS 2.11 comm., p. 36.

<sup>388</sup> VS 2.11 comm., p. 36.

Given that the inclusion of the *mahāvākya* takes only a line or two in Niścaldās's text, it follows that the vast majority of the text is devoted to a single purpose: *the removal of doubts*.

This, then, is the main purpose of *The Ocean of Inquiry*: to remove whatever doubts stand as obstacles preventing the rise of liberating knowledge. This interpretation, which I maintain is key to understanding the text—both its purpose and also the pedagogical strategies it employs, which I will discuss in the next chapter—finds support in Niścaldās's own statement of the uniqueness of his work in his opening chapter: “Without *The Ocean of Inquiry*,” he writes, “Doubts will not be destroyed.”<sup>389</sup>

#### *The meaning and process of inquiry*

Niścaldās usually makes a point of defining his key terms, but curiously, he leaves *vicāra* undefined, though it is one of the central and most frequently recurring terms in the text. In Sanskrit, *vicāra* is a nominal derivative of the causative of the verbal root *car*, “move about, roam, wander,” plus the intensifying prefix *vi*. Literally *vicāra* thus refers to the act of causing (the mind) to wander about or roam over (a topic). Monier-Williams defines *vi-cār* as “to move hither and thither (in the mind), ponder, reflect, consider; to doubt, hesitate; to examine, investigate, ascertain.”<sup>390</sup> Apte defines *vicāra* as “reflection, deliberation, thought, consideration,” then also as “examination, discussion, investigation.”<sup>391</sup> He also mentions a legal sense, in which *vicāra* can mean either a trial or a judgment. A *vicāra-bhū* refers to a tribunal or seat of justice (especially that of Yama, the god of death); likewise, *vicāra-sthala*, a

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<sup>389</sup> VS 1.8, p. 3.

<sup>390</sup> 2003, p. 958.

<sup>391</sup> 2004, p. 852.

“place of *vicāra*,” can refer either to a tribunal or to a logical discussion.<sup>392</sup> Both the legal and the logical sense, I would suggest, convey the idea of coming to a conclusion only after careful consideration of two sides of an issue.

Pītāmbār glosses the word on its first appearance,<sup>393</sup> and his definition is worth “inquiring” into carefully:

“Inquiry” refers to the discrimination (*vivecana*), or ascertainment (*nirṇaya*), of objects (*padārtha*) such as the non-conscious (*jaḍa*) and consciousness (*cetana*), as undertaken by two sides in debate (*prativādī au siddhāntī*), or by a guru and disciple.<sup>394</sup>

He goes on to mention that by implication (*lakṣaṇā*), the word *vicāra* can also refer to the *siddhāntas*, or conclusions, reached through this process: “a *siddhānta*, or conclusion, is the ascertained meaning (*nirṇīt-arth*) which is the object of the inquiry.” Pītāmbār’s definition of inquiry is strongly reminiscent of the definition of “ascertainment” (*nirṇaya*), one of the sixteen categories in the *Nyāya-sūtras*: “‘Ascertainment’ is the settling (*avadhāraṇa*) of an object (*artha*) after careful consideration (*vimṛśya*) of both sides (*pakṣa-pratipakṣa*).”<sup>395</sup> Ascertainment is in turn closely related to the next of the sixteen categories, *vāda*, or “discussion,” which is defined (in part) as taking up two sides, a *pakṣa* and a *pratipakṣa*, for investigation.<sup>396</sup> In his *bhāṣya* on the sutra on “ascertainment,” Vātsyānana nicely explains the *modus operandi* of the vast majority of Indian philosophy, including Nīscaldās’s text:

In every discussion, what happens is as follows: (a) At first, one disputant states one view and supports it with arguments, and rejects all the objections that the other party could bring against that view. (b) The second disputant thereupon refutes the arguments put forward by the former in support of his view, and

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<sup>392</sup> Apte 2004, p. 852.

<sup>393</sup> VS 1.6 (p. 1), which announces the title of the work: “I shall compose (lit. ‘speak’) this *Ocean of Inquiry*, which brims with profound Vedic doctrines (*siddhānta*); beholding it, the wise rejoice.”

<sup>394</sup> Gloss 1, VS 1.6, p. 1.

<sup>395</sup> *Nyāyasūtra* 1.1.41 (trans. mine; text per Tailaṅga 1896, p. 47).

<sup>396</sup> *Nyāyasūtra* 1.2.1 (Tailaṅga 1896, p. 49).

also answers the arguments urged against the objections put forward by himself. (c) So it goes on, until one stops; and where one has stopped, the other becomes established.<sup>397</sup>

Note that *both* sides are needed: only then is doubt or uncertainty set aside. “Deliberation (*vimarśaḥ*),” Vātsyānana says, “consists in bringing to light the two sides of the question.”<sup>398</sup>

I suggest that Niścaldās’s understanding of inquiry is quite similar to what Vātsyānana is describing here. To be precise, we might distinguish three senses of inquiry at work in Niścaldās’s text. Most broadly, inquiry simply means careful consideration or thinking.<sup>399</sup> More narrowly, it means investigating the meaning of the Upanishads; inquiry in this sense is synonymous with *śravaṇa*, or hearing. In addition to these two meanings, I suggest, there is a third, crucial sense: inquiry as the *method* of consideration or investigation. *Vicāra*, like *vāda*, which could be seen as its formalized equivalent, is essentially a dialectical method or process in which a doubt is raised and then resolved. For Niścaldās, as for the Naiyāyikas, doubt always involves two *koṭis*, or sides, as he explains at length in the *Vṛtti-prabhākar*. A doubtful cognition always takes the form, “Is it X or not?”<sup>400</sup> On my interpretation, this internal wavering is expressed externally through the process of *pūrva-pakṣa* and *pakṣa*, with each expressing one side of the doubt. For example, a guru says: “You are Brahman.” If the student’s mind is entirely free of faults (*doṣa*), these words alone are sufficient to produce liberation. If there is any fault, however, they will not produce *pramā*, or knowledge, but instead a doubtful

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<sup>397</sup> Trans. Jha 1984, p. 459 (*Bhāṣya* on *Nyāyasūtra* 1.1.41. —Technically the passage above is part of a *pūrva-pakṣa*, but the quoted portion is accepted by the *siddhāntin* as well; what is rejected is the claim the *pūrva-pakṣin* goes on to make, that *nirṇaya* is reached simply through the final step, rather than through the process as a whole.)

<sup>398</sup> Trans. slightly modified from Jha (1984, p. 460).

<sup>399</sup> In this broad sense, Niścaldās often uses the construction *vicār karike* (“having inquired”) to introduce his real position, in contrast to a simplified position adopted for pedagogical reasons. The sense is: “But when one considers [the matter] more carefully, one sees ... .”

<sup>400</sup> In his discussion of *saṁśaya* in the *Vṛtti-prabhākar* (7.5, pp. 217-8), Niścaldās points out that even more complicated forms of doubt (“four-cornered” doubts) can be reduced to this form. Thus, the doubt “Is that a man or a post (that I see in the distance)?” is simply a conjunction of the doubts “Is that a man or not?” and “Is that a post or not?”

cognition of the form: “Am I Brahman or not?” On the one hand, one trusts the guru and wants to believe what he says; on the other hand, one has reasons (e.g., the erroneous identification of oneself with one’s body) to believe that one is not Brahman. This epistemic conflict results in the doubtful cognition, which must be removed through the process of inquiry. In the next chapter, I will illustrate this process with several concrete examples from the guru’s dialogues with the three brothers. For now, it is worth noting that Niścaldās’s teachings are always presented dialectically, as an exchange between a *pūrva-pakṣin* and a *siddhāntin*, and that the *pūrva-pakṣa* is almost always labeled as a “doubt” (*saṃśaya*).

Inquiry is the primary *activity* undertaken by those who are on the path of liberation. As Niścaldās writes in discussing the *anubandha*<sup>401</sup> of relation (*saṃbandha*): “The relation of the qualified [student] to inquiry is that of agent and activity. The qualified [student] is the agent, and inquiry is that which is undertaken.”<sup>402</sup> Here inquiry is used as a broad category covering everything “to be done” by the student in this text, and we might again recall the originally ritual context of the notion of *adhikāra*. In Mīmāṃsā, if one desires to be reborn in the temporary heaven known as *svarga*, the means is an invisible result (*adrṣṭa*) secured through performance of the *jyotiṣṭoma* sacrifice. Once certain ritual prerequisites are met, one who performs the ritual properly is sure to meet with success. The parallel in Niścaldās’s vision of Vedānta seems fairly exact: if one desires liberation, the means is knowledge (*jñāna*) secured through the practice of inquiry. Once one has satisfied the intellectual and moral prerequisites (*adhikāra*), one who performs inquiry properly is sure to meet with success.

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<sup>401</sup> Vedāntic works conventionally open with a discussion of four *anubandhas* (the “connections” that lead one to continue reading): qualification (*adhikāra*), subject (*viśaya*), purpose (*prayojana*), and relation (*saṃbandha*).

<sup>402</sup> VS 1.24 comm., p. 16.

To summarize the position so far: in order for the words “You are Brahman” to produce liberating knowledge, the mind must be properly prepared. If there are any faults (*doṣas*) in the mind, the *mahāvākya* will not be able to produce *pramā*. The three faults are impurity, instability, and ignorance. Impurity and instability are presupposed by *adhikāra*, so the only remaining task is to remove ignorance. Ignorance can be subdivided into the faults of doubt and erroneous inclination. Doubt is removed through inquiry—through a process of *thinking*, to translate the word *vicāra* according to its modern Hindi meaning—a dialectical method of expressing and subsequently resolving doubts. The transformation of doubtful cognition into doubt-free cognition marks a movement from “weak awareness” to “strong awareness,” which is what constitutes liberating knowledge. The purpose of *The Ocean of Inquiry* is therefore the removal of doubts, through a process of inquiry culminating in the liberating awareness of one’s true nature.

#### *The role of nididhyāsana*

Only one element on the path to liberation remains unaccounted for: the fault of “erroneous inclination” (*viparīta-bhāvanā*) or “error” (*viparyaya*), which Nīścaldās tells us is removed through *nididhyāsana*, which I have so far been translating as “contemplation” and which is often viewed as a kind of meditation. This interpretation is problematic, however, since elsewhere Nīścaldās clearly sets forth the position that error (*bhrama-jñāna*) is removed only through knowledge (*tattva-jñāna*). How exactly is “contemplation,” which is distinct from knowledge, supposed to remove error? In chapter 5 of the VS, Nīścaldās draws a sharp distinction between *dhyāna* (a generic term for meditation) and *jñāna* (knowledge). Knowledge, he tells us, arises in dependence on a means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*) and an object of knowledge (*prameya*), and unlike meditation, it does not depend on any desire or effort on the

part of the person.<sup>403</sup> When the moon is out and one looks at the moon, a knowledge of the moon arises whether one desires it or not, without expending any effort.<sup>404</sup> Meditation, by contrast, requires effort and desire, as well as a scriptural injunction, Niścaldās says, and it does not depend on *pramāṇa* or *prameya*.

Niścaldās defines *dhyāna* as “a continuous *ṛtti* of the mind having the form of the object of meditation” (*nirantar dhyeyākār citt kī ṛtti kūṃ dhyān*). He immediately adds: “If there is instability (*vikṣepa*) in the *ṛtti*, then with effort it must be stabilized (*haṭh saim ṛtti kī sthiti karai*).”<sup>405</sup> Notice that this definition closely parallels Niścaldās’s definition of *nididhyāsana*, in VS chapter 1, as “the stabilization (*sthiti*) of a *ṛtti* having the form of Brahman, without any intervening *ṛtti* having the form of that which is not the self.”<sup>406</sup> The second half of this definition suggests the idea of overcoming instability (*vikṣepa*) by focusing the mind within, while the first half seems to identify *nididhyāsana* as a form of meditation. What is puzzling is that Niścaldās is relatively dismissive of meditation in VS chapter 5: “Knowledge does not depend on effort: an awareness-bearing *ṛtti* of the mind will at once destroy the veil [of ignorance], so there is no point in stabilizing it.”<sup>407</sup>

Meditation, Niścaldās explains, may or may not be in accordance with the object of meditation.<sup>408</sup> For example, one can meditate on Viṣṇu as a *śālagrāma* stone, though of course Viṣṇu is not in fact a stone. One can also meditate on Viṣṇu by visualizing his proper form

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<sup>403</sup> VS 5.167 comm., p. 169.

<sup>404</sup> VS 5.167 comm., p. 169.

<sup>405</sup> VS 5.167 comm., p. 170.

<sup>406</sup> VS 1.23 comm., pp. 10-11.

<sup>407</sup> VS 5.167 comm., p. 170.

<sup>408</sup> My discussion in this paragraph closely follows VS 5.167 comm., p. 170.

(having four arms, holding a discus, etc.). In that case, one's meditation corresponds with the actual nature of the object being meditated on, but it is nonetheless distinct from knowledge. Both meditative awareness and the awareness that counts as *pramā* (knowledge) consist of the mind taking on the *ākāra*, or "form," of an object of awareness; the difference is that in meditation, the *ākāra* is mentally constructed through an effort of will, rather than produced by a *pramāṇa*. One meditates on Viṣṇu in his proper form not because one has seen him, but because of an injunction in scripture prescribing the meditation. Nīścaldās specifies that even the lofty form of meditation known as *ahaṃ-graha-dhyāna* ("meditation grasping the 'I'"), which Adṛṣṭi is taught in VS chapter 5, is distinct from knowledge. This meditation seems to be equivalent to *nididhyāsana*: Nīścaldās describes it as a practice of "continually stabilizing, through an effort [of will], the *vṛtti* 'I am Brahman.'"

In addition to the definition of *nididhyāsana* in VS chapter 1 and this discussion of *dhyāna* in chapter 5, Nīścaldās also discusses meditation at length in chapter 7, in an excursus on the practice of yoga.<sup>409</sup> The excursus is quite detailed, providing a description of the eight "limbs" of yoga as described by Patañjali, including a discussion of obstacles encountered in the practice of yoga, as well as the various stages of *samādhi*. What is interesting, however (and what has not been noticed by the few others who have written on Nīścaldās<sup>410</sup>), is that this entire discussion of yoga is in fact a *pūrva-pakṣa*; that is, it is set forth in the context of an opponent's position. The objection comes up following a description of Tattvadṛṣṭi as liberated in life. Nīścaldās writes of such a one: "There is no fixed rule for his behavior," to which an

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<sup>409</sup> VS 7.16 comm., pp. 287-294.

<sup>410</sup> Dādū (1994), for instance, in his biographical account of Nīścaldās, unjustifiably assumes that Nīścaldās must himself have practiced the eight *aṅgas* of yoga at some point in his life (pp. 30, 43).



objector says there is a rule for the behavior of a sage: he should spend his days in *samādhi*.<sup>411</sup> There follows, in verse, a description of the eight limbs of yoga. But after listing the eight, Niścaldās writes a capping verse: “Having heard *samādhi* spoken of as something needing to be done, Tattvadr̥ṣṭi laughed. He gave no reply, [and people] took him to be a raving spirit.”<sup>412</sup>

The commentary on these verses follows exactly the same pattern, though the eight limbs are described in much greater detail. Niścaldās begins with a preview of his own position: “there is no [fixed] rule for the bodily behavior (*śarīra-vyavahāra*) of one who possesses knowledge.”<sup>413</sup> After this the discussion becomes complicated in the way that Indian philosophy often does: there are so many voices and provisional views, it is difficult to say what Niścaldās agrees with and what he does not. For example, the discussion continues with a *pūrva-pakṣin* saying: “A sage will continue to beg and eat, but aside from these activities, non-activity/renunciation (*nivṛtti*) is a rule for sages.”<sup>414</sup> An opponent (to the *pūrva-pakṣin*) says: “the nature of the mind is exceedingly unstable. ... Hence the sage must engage [in activity] for the sake of attaining some support for the mind.”<sup>415</sup> The *pūrva-pakṣin* then replies that this is true of people who lack *samādhi*, but that the sage, as one who possesses knowledge, must be one who possesses *samādhi*. He then explains the eight *aṅgas* which lead to *samādhi*. The description goes on for several pages, with sub-objections and replies. The long *pūrva-pakṣa* concludes with an appeal to the authority of other Vedāntic *ācāryas*, many of whom “have

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<sup>411</sup> The quotation is from VS 7, verse 7 (p. 284); the objection begins at verse 9 (p. 285).

<sup>412</sup> VS 7.16, p. 285.

<sup>413</sup> VS 7.16 comm., p. 285.

<sup>414</sup> VS 7.16 comm., p. 286.

<sup>415</sup> VS 7.16 comm., p. 287.

written in accordance with this very position.”<sup>416</sup> “Nevertheless,” Nīścaldās goes on to answer the *pūrva-pakṣin*, “it is not possible to say that there is a fixed rule even for renunciation on the part of sages.”<sup>417</sup> Nīścaldās’s position is instead that sages behave in accordance with their *prārabdha-karma*: some might even be led by their *prārabdha* to actions which, being opposed to meditative states of concentration, will prevent them from experiencing absorption in bliss; but this does not mean they are not liberated. The commentary concludes with the coda: “Having heard the prescription of a rule in the form of *samādhī*, Tattvadrṣṭi laughed.”<sup>418</sup>

We can thus say two things for certain about Nīścaldās’s position: first, he did not believe yogic meditation was necessary for sages; second, he went so far as to regard such a position as laughable. This does not mean, of course, that he rejects every point made in the discussion of yoga; it remains a possibility that he regards yogic practice as necessary for the *arising* of knowledge. If this were true, however, one wonders (a) why he does not discuss yoga earlier in the text, (b) why he does not give it a more authoritative place, instead of in the midst of a *pūrva-pakṣa*, and (c) why the guru does not instruct any of his three disciples to practice *yoga*.

Later in the same chapter, the third brother, Tarkadrṣṭi, engages in a study of non-Vedāntic *śāstras*. In summarizing the usefulness of the yoga system, he concludes: “He [Patañjali] composed the *Yoga-sūtras* to destroy the taint of the inner faculty in the form of scattering (*vikṣepa*). ... Thus the *Yoga-śāstra*, too, is a cause of liberation by way of bringing about *nididhyāsana*, which is a means to knowledge.”<sup>419</sup> Two points are clear from this passage:

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<sup>416</sup> VS 7.16 comm., p. 294.

<sup>417</sup> VS 7.16 comm., p. 294.

<sup>418</sup> VS 7.16 comm., p. 298.

<sup>419</sup> VS 7.21 comm., p. 306.

first, the practice of yoga is connected with *nididhyāsana*; second, the practice of yoga aims at the removal of *vikṣepa*. From this one can infer that *nididhyāsana* itself is corrective to *vikṣepa*. Now recall that in principle, a qualified student should not have any *vikṣepa*; this fault has already been removed, which would seem to render *nididhyāsana* unnecessary. Why, then, does *nididhyāsana* have a place in Niścaldās’s description of the path to liberation?

The answer, I believe, lies in the distance between ideals and realities: the ideal disciple, for Niścaldās, does not seem to need *nididhyāsana*. This is exactly what we see play out in the case of Tattvadrṣṭi, who achieves liberation without, apparently, ever practicing any special discipline of meditation. Further support for the idea that, for Niścaldās, *nididhyāsana* is only for lower-ranking students—i.e., for students who do not reach the ideal of perfect *adhikāra*—comes from some of the definitions given in the course of his discussion of yoga. The mind is said to have five stages of development, the first of which is “dispersion” (*kṣepa*), defined as “a strong *vāsanā* of things which are not the self—such as a *vāsanā* of the world, of the body, of the *śāstras*, etc.—all of which are transformations of *rajas*.”<sup>420</sup> This seems to correspond to *viparīta-bhāvanā*; the perception “I am my body” etc. are therefore *the transformations of rajas*. The problem is that a truly qualified student is supposed to be free of the operations of *rajas* already.

It is worth noting, however, that *rajas* operates in degrees, some quite gross and other more subtle. The third of the five stages of mental development is in fact labeled “*vikṣepa*,” which is again a function of *rajas*; but here it is defined not as a “strong” *vāsanā*, but rather as “the occasional involvement in external things on the part of a mind engaged in

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<sup>420</sup> VS 7.16 comm., p. 291.

meditation.”<sup>421</sup> This kind of *vikṣepa* is much subtler than the (*vi*)*kṣepa* of a worldly, always dispersed mind. This distinction parallels a distinction Nīścaldās often returns to, of strong versus weak attachment to objects, and, correspondingly, strong versus weak detachment. Elsewhere in his discussion of yoga, for example, the fault of “passion” (*kaṣāya*) is discussed, and an objector says it is impossible for a yogin to experience this obstacle, because yogins have already given up attachments. The reply distinguishes between attachments as such and “their subtle impressions,” which result from experiences of attachment in countless previous births; even at the time of *samādhi*, such impressions can linger.<sup>422</sup> On the basis of this distinction, one might well distinguish between strong and weak *vikṣepa*, and by extension between degrees of concentration, its corrective.

The idea that the highest level of disciple does not need to practice *nididhyāsana* also finds confirmation in a distinction Pītāmbār introduces in his gloss on *The Ocean of Inquiry*. The distinction does not necessarily represent Nīścaldās’s position—Nīścaldās is silent on the matter—but it is not in conflict with Nīścaldās’s position, and it accords well with the position I have just been sketching. Pītāmbār writes:

There are [in fact] two kinds of qualified students: those who have performed *upāsanā* and those who have not. The first are those who have performed *upāsanā* on *saguṇa-brahma* to the point of attaining perfect concentration. In them all of the means (*sādhana*) spoken of in the *śāstras* are fully evident. The second are those who have not performed *upāsanā* on *saguṇa-brahma* prior to awareness (i.e. prior to the awareness produced by hearing a *mahāvākya*). Not all of the means (*sādhana*) [which constitute qualification] are fully evident in them; rather, some of the means are fully evident, [while] others remain undeveloped. Hence, since their minds lack one-pointedness, [even] after awareness arises, *viparīta-bhāvanā* remains, and in order to remove it, *nididhyāsana* must be practiced.<sup>423</sup>

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<sup>421</sup> VS 7.16 comm., p. 291.

<sup>422</sup> VS 7.16 comm., p. 292.

<sup>423</sup> Gloss 96, VS p. 37. —Vidyāraṇya holds a similar position; see *Pañcadaśī* 7.104-5 (Swāhānanda, pp. 278-9).

On Pītāmbār's interpretation, *nididhyāsana* is not necessary for all seekers but only for those who come to the path with partial qualifications. Because they have not already performed *upāsana*s, which steady the mind, they must subsequently perform *nididhyāsana*, which accomplishes the same thing (with the only difference that the object of meditation is not external). Pītāmbār also helpfully suggests that lack of concentration and *viparīta-bhāvanā* are closely related. If one were fully concentrated when one heard the words "You are Brahman," a contrary awareness would not arise. Since, however, one lacks concentration, the words are not able to produce their effect, and instead past *vāsanā*s lead to contrary cognitions.

The question should therefore perhaps not be, "What is the role of meditation," but rather: "What does it mean for the mind to be concentrated?" The word for concentration is *ekāgratā*, literally "one-pointedness." For Nīścaldās, the purpose of this state of "one-pointedness" is not, as *yogins* would have it, to allow the mind to sustain a thought over time; rather, its purpose is to allow for the flashing forth of a single, liberating thought. Concentration allows the mind to focus on the inward self, which is the object of the liberating *vr̥tti* "I am Brahman." The mind is habituated to focusing on outward objects, and in order to achieve concentration, one must be capable of withdrawing the mind's focus from outward objects to the inward self. But distractions come from within as well as without: in addition to the objects themselves, our minds contain strong *vāsanā*s, or traces both from previous states of mind and previous lives, which work to push our minds toward outward objects. In order to achieve concentration on the inward self, one must thus overcome both the lure of outward objects and the push of relatively inward *vāsanā*s. Nīścaldās's view of meditation seems to be that it trains one to achieve this state of concentration. Once sufficient concentration is achieved, meditation as such has no value. To summarize this interpretation of Nīścaldās's

view: meditation seems to be necessary only insofar as the prerequisite of a stable mind has not been met already; and even then, it is necessary only until the mind has reached a state of concentration. Just as inquiry does not produce knowledge but simply removes the fault of doubt, meditation simply removes the fault of instability. For Niścaldās, the state of one-pointedness seems to involve two related conditions: first, the mind must be capable of focusing within (on the self, which is the object of the liberating *vṛtti* “I am Brahman”); second, the mind must not be distracted by *vāsanās*.

There is, however, another possible interpretation of Niścaldās’s view of *nididhyāsana*, taking its cue from Śaṅkara’s discussion of the term in the *Brahma-sūtra-bhāṣya*.<sup>424</sup> At 4.1.1 Śaṅkara says that hearing, reflection, and contemplation should not be performed just once, but should be repeated until they result in direct realization of Brahman; he also points out that *nididhyāsana* by its very nature implies a repeated practice. To explain *nididhyāsana*, he gives the worldly example of a woman who, when her husband is away, “is engaged in thinking of her husband constantly and is anxious about him.”<sup>425</sup> In his commentary on the next *sūtra*, he has an opponent ask: “What purpose can be served by the repetition where a (single) mental act about the supreme Brahman calls up the supreme Brahman? ... If the hearing of such texts as ‘That thou art’ once only does not generate the realization of the identity of Brahman and the Self, then how can it be expected that even a repetition of that will produce it?”<sup>426</sup> After some back and forth, Śaṅkara sets forth the *siddhānta*: for those who can realize

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<sup>424</sup> The interpretation of *nididhyāsana* in Śaṅkara’s works is a difficult problem in its own right. Hirst (1996) speaks of an “ambiguity in Saṅkara’s understanding of *nididhyāsana* and his tendency to ignore it where possible” (p. 60); see also Rambachan 1991, pp. 108-9 and Comans 1993. My intention here is simply to outline one possible interpretation and to suggest its applicability to Niścaldās’s thought.

<sup>425</sup> Trans. Gambhirananda 2004, p. 813.

<sup>426</sup> Trans. Gambhirananda 2004, p. 814.

Brahman directly after hearing “That thou art” just once, nothing more is necessary; but for those who cannot, repetition is necessary.<sup>427</sup> He gives the apt example of Śvetaketu, the boy in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* who receives the teaching “That thou art” from his father: in the Upanishad, the father repeats the words many times, illustrating his teaching with various examples until the lesson finally sinks in. Śaṅkara says that with each example Śvetaketu’s father “removes the respective causes of his misconceptions,” preparing the way for true knowledge to arise.<sup>428</sup> This position is quite similar to Nīścaldās’s understanding of inquiry and its role as a remover intellectual obstacles.

Śaṅkara points out that it is “a matter of experience” that understanding derived from hearing often dawns gradually: “though the meaning may be vaguely apprehended from a sentence uttered only once, people understand it fully after removing progressively the false ideas standing in the way, through a process of sustained consideration.”<sup>429</sup> Specifically, the sentence *tat tvam asi* “cannot produce a direct realization of its own meaning in those people to whom these two entities [i.e. Brahman and the self] remain obstructed by ignorance, doubt, and confusion; for the meaning of a sentence is dependent on the meaning of the words.”<sup>430</sup> Notice that by this point in the discussion, Śaṅkara seems to be referring only to hearing and reflection: “Thus it is that for such people it becomes desirable to resort repeatedly to the scriptures and reasoning that lead to a clarification of the concepts.”<sup>431</sup> Many things are superimposed on the self, and one of these superimpositions might be removed at “one

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<sup>427</sup> Cf. Gambhirananda 2004, p. 815.

<sup>428</sup> Trans. Gambhirananda 2004, p. 815.

<sup>429</sup> Trans. Gambhirananda 2004, p. 816.

<sup>430</sup> Trans. Gambhirananda 2004, pp. 816-817.

<sup>431</sup> Trans. Gambhirananda 2004, p. 817.

attempt at comprehension, and another at another. In this sense the dawn of a conception in a progressive manner becomes justifiable.”<sup>432</sup> But he insists that all of this is “penultimate.”<sup>433</sup> For those “who have no obstruction like ignorance, doubt, and confusion,” a single hearing suffices; and once knowledge arises, “no progressive development is admitted.”<sup>434</sup>

Because Śaṅkara seems to understand *nididhyāsana* primarily as being engaged constantly in a particular object of thought, and because in the ensuing discussion he refers to hearing and reflection only, it is possible to interpret *nididhyāsana* as referring not to any special practice of meditation, but to a continual dwelling on what has been learned in hearing and reflection.<sup>435</sup> This, then, is a second possible interpretation of the role of *nididhyāsana* for Nīścaldās. On this interpretation, *nididhyāsana* is in fact included in the dialogue between the guru and the three brothers. The repetition of topics and arguments, and the overall intentness with which Brahman is being discussed, would then amount to the stage of *nididhyāsana*, rather than any separate practice of meditation. On this view, *śravaṇa* would refer to establishing the meaning of the Upanishads, *manana* to running through arguments supporting their meaning and refuting opposing views, and *nididhyāsana* to a concentrated rehashing of the conclusions drawn from both; on this reading, *nididhyāsana* is also an intellectual practice, involving turning the teaching over in one’s mind again and again, considering it carefully, like a student reviewing for an exam.<sup>436</sup>

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<sup>432</sup> Trans. Gambhirananda 2004, p. 817.

<sup>433</sup> Trans. Gambhirananda 2004, p. 817.

<sup>434</sup> Trans. Gambhirananda 2004, p. 817.

<sup>435</sup> This interpretation accords with that of Saccidanandendra Sarasvati, a modern Advaitin, who explains *nididhyāsana* as “sustained attention to previously attained right knowledge” (cited in Hirst 1996, p. 64).

<sup>436</sup> Sureśvara adopts a similar position at one point in his *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad-vārttika*, writing that *nididhyāsana* is simply the repetition of hearing and reflection; elsewhere he solves the “problem” of *nididhyāsana* in a different



To summarize, two possible interpretations of *nididhyāsana* have been given. On the first, *nididhyāsana* is a kind of meditation and is not necessary for everyone. Since Nīścaldās is interested chiefly in the highest level of disciples, who do not need it, it does not play a role in *The Ocean of Inquiry*. On the second interpretation, *nididhyāsana* is in fact already contained, implicitly, in the text; or rather, *nididhyāsana* is what we bring to the text, by studying it and considering it carefully and repeatedly in a concentrated frame of mind. On the first view, the emphasis is on withdrawing the mind from external obstacles and overcoming *vāsanās*; on the second view, the emphasis is on coming to a clearer understanding of the meaning of the *mahāvākya*. Either interpretation would explain how Tattvadr̥ṣṭi is able to achieve liberation at the end of his dialogue with the guru without ever have gone off to practice meditation.

Whichever interpretation is followed, one could say in general terms that for Nīścaldās, *nididhyāsana* corresponds to a kind of concentration, which is the opposite of mental scattering (*vikṣepa*). This holds true whether the concentration is a special meditative technique, or whether it refers to concentrating on the truths learned through inquiry so as to understand them more clearly. In fact, on this more general understanding of *nididhyāsana*, the two interpretations can be reconciled. One might say that different disciples enter the path with different capacities for concentration. Some might need yogic practices to tame their wandering minds, while for others, repetition of the process of inquiry will suffice. It is perhaps worth noting that this “latitudinarian” interpretation finds expression in Vidyāranya’s *Pañcadaśī*, which was one of Nīścaldās’s major sources. Vidyāranya writes: “In one-pointed devotion to the non-dual Brahman, there is no fixed rule, as there is in meditation

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way, identifying it with realization and thus effectively reducing the triad of hearing, reflection, and contemplation to just hearing and reflection. See Potter 2008, vol. 3, pp. 445 and 485.

on a form of God.”<sup>437</sup> He explains that *nididhyāsana* can take many forms, including “thinking or talking of Brahman”; even listening to *itihāsas*, Vidyāranya says, can be a form of *nididhyāsana*.<sup>438</sup> On this view, *nididhyāsana* is a general term for sustained concentration on Brahman, which could take the form of either meditation or the process of inquiry itself—or even reading a work such as *The Ocean of Inquiry*.

*The mirror of the mind: An illuminating passage from the Vṛtti-prabhākar*

Although my focus is on the path to liberation as it appears in *The Ocean of Inquiry*, it is worth highlighting one particularly helpful passage from Niścaldās’s other major work, the *Vṛtti-prabhākar*, which confirms that for Niścaldās the purpose of *nididhyāsana*—whatever its actual practice entails—is to bring about a state of mental concentration sufficient for the words “You are Brahman” to produce liberating knowledge. This passage also helps us see, once again, the importance of material epistemology, for it draws on the familiar image of the mind as a mirror.

The context is a long discussion of indirect versus direct knowledge, which I will sketch briefly without going through the details of the argument. First, Niścaldās says that it is “the position of all works of Advaita” (*sakal advait-śāstra kā siddhānt*) that there are two means to the ultimate knowledge (*tattva-jñāna*) which takes away ignorance. For those of the highest qualifications (*uttama adhikārī*), “the means (*sādhana*) is *śravaṇa* etc.,” i.e. the threefold path of hearing, reflection, and contemplation. For those of mid-level qualification (*madhyama adhikārī*), the means is “the *aham-graha-upāsanā* of *nirguṇa-brahman*.”<sup>439</sup> As we will see in the

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<sup>437</sup> *Pañcadaśī* 7.118; trans. Swāhānanda, p. 283.

<sup>438</sup> *Pañcadaśī* 7.118, 122-3; trans. Swāhānanda, p. 283-5.

<sup>439</sup> VP 7.122, p. 417.

next chapter, this is precisely the scheme Niścaldās follows in *The Ocean of Inquiry* for the first two brothers, Tattvadr̥ṣṭi and Adr̥ṣṭi: the eldest brother follows the path of “hearing etc.”—the path I have been discussing in this chapter—while the middle brother practices “I-grasping meditation” on the formless Brahman. Interestingly, in this passage from the *Vṛtti-prabhākar* Niścaldās does not mention the lowest grade of disciple, which corresponds to the youngest brother, Tarkadr̥ṣṭi; and indeed, as we will also see in the next chapter, this grade of disciple poses a curious puzzle of interpretation. But I will return to this point later. For now, let us keep to Niścaldās’s discussion in the *Vṛtti-prabhākar*. He says there are two positions concerning the *pramāṇa* which serves as the instrument for *tattva-jñāna*. The first position is that the *pramāṇa* is *prasaṃkhyāna*, which Niścaldās glosses as “a flow of cognitions” (*vṛtti ke pravāh kūṃ prasaṃkhyān*).<sup>440</sup> On this position, he says, the process is actually the same for the highest- and the middle-grade disciples. Just as the middle-grade disciple meditates continually on *nirguṇa* Brahman, so too does the highest grade-disciple, after practicing *manana*, meditate continually on Brahman (through *nididhyāsana* rather than *upāsana*, both of which, on this view, are forms of *prasaṃkhyāna*).<sup>441</sup> The proponent of this position then gives the stock example of a lover meditating on his absent beloved to the point that she mentally appears directly before him. This position still recognizes the importance of the Veda, since *śabda-pramāṇa* serves as “the root of *prasaṃkhyāna*”<sup>442</sup>; but it makes meditation rather than the *mahāvākya* the direct, ultimate means to knowledge.

A second position, which is quite similar but which Niścaldās introduces as a distinct position, is Vācaspati’s view that the mind (*manas*) is the organ which directly perceives

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<sup>440</sup> VP 7.123, p. 417.

<sup>441</sup> VP 7.123, pp. 417-8.

<sup>442</sup> VP 7.123, p. 418.

Brahman, *prasaṃkhyāna* being an aiding or cooperating factor (*sahakāri*). On this position, even in the case of the meditative appearance of one's beloved, the mind is really the direct means, not the meditation.<sup>443</sup>

Against both of these positions, Niścaldās introduces what he identifies as “the main view in Advaita works” (*advait-granthan kā mukhya mat*): that the awareness produced by a *mahāvākya* is what produces liberation, not any practice of *prasaṃkhyāna*.<sup>444</sup> It is admitted on this position, however, that a one-pointed mind is an aiding or cooperating factor in the arising of liberating knowledge. Indeed, the mind is a cooperating factor in all instances of cognition, Niścaldās says, because it is the material cause (*upādāna*) of awareness.<sup>445</sup> This position—that *śabda* is the immediate cause of direct knowledge—is itself divided into three sub-positions, one of them maintaining that direct knowledge results from the *pramāṇa*, the other two giving different versions of a position according to which direct knowledge results because of the immediacy of the self (the object rather than the means of knowledge). We need not go into the details of these positions, which would take us too far from the question of *nididhyāsana*. It suffices to quote Niścaldās's version of the first position, which, after a long discussion, he identifies as the correct (*samīcīna*) position<sup>446</sup>:

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<sup>443</sup> VP 7.124, p. 418.

<sup>444</sup> VP 7.125, pp. 418-9.

<sup>445</sup> VP 7.125, p. 419. —Niścaldās uses this as a reason to reject Vācaspati's position, since one and the same thing cannot be both material cause (*upādāna*) and instrumental cause (*karana*). —In the same passage (VP 7.125, p. 419), Niścaldās offers a decidedly unmystical interpretation of the well-known Upanishadic teaching that Brahman is beyond mind and speech: he says that Brahman's being beyond mind means Brahman cannot be grasped through mental perception (*mānasa pratyakṣa*), but not that Brahman cannot be grasped by thought (*vṛtti*). Brahman can be understood in the mind—thanks to *śabda-pramāṇa*—just not by the mind, so to speak. As for Brahman's being beyond speech, Niścaldās says it makes no sense for Brahman to be entirely beyond speech, since then the Upanishads could not produce liberation. On his reading, the meaning is simply that Brahman is beyond the reach of the denotative power of words (*śakti-vṛtti*); Brahman can nonetheless be expressed through the implicative power of words (*lakṣaṇā-vṛtti*).

<sup>446</sup> See VP 7.144, p.429.

Direct knowledge *can* arise through verbal testimony when the latter is preceded by *śravaṇa* and *manana* and is accompanied by a one-pointed mind bearing the impressions of a [previously acquired] indirect knowledge of Brahman.<sup>447</sup>

These lines are worth analyzing closely, for we see that although verbal testimony is the direct means for producing the liberating knowledge of Brahman, three conditions must be met. The first condition is that one must have already practiced hearing and reflection. From *The Ocean of Inquiry* we know that this condition ensures that the awareness produced by the *mahāvākya* will be doubt-free. The second condition is that the mind must be one-pointed; this seems to correspond to *nididhyāsana*. Presumably one will have no need of *nididhyāsana* if one's mind is already one-pointed. If, however, the mind is unsteady, one might need to meditate repeatedly on the words "I am Brahman" until the mind is able to settle on them fixedly, in order for the knowledge of their meaning to arise. The third condition is that the mind must bear impressions (*saṃskāras*) of an indirect knowledge of Brahman. Here it is useful to know that Nīścaldās's account of verbal testimony (given at length in chapter 3 of the *Vṛtti-prabhākar*) has memory playing a role in every instance of knowledge produced through verbal testimony; for in order to grasp the meaning of a sentence, in addition to there being a connection between the ear and the words uttered, one must also have a memory of the meaning of the individual words, which one has learned before; and this memory is communicated through *saṃskāras*, or

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<sup>447</sup> VP 7.126, p. 419.

mental impressions preserved from the past.<sup>448</sup> In short, the third requirement is simply that one should know and remember what the words of the *mahāvākya* mean.<sup>449</sup>

An interesting question to raise here is how this description relates to the other case of verbal testimony producing direct knowledge that Nīścaldās appeals to in *The Ocean of Inquiry*, namely, the well-known example of the statement “You are the tenth” (spoken to a traveller who, having crossed a river, thinks someone has drowned because he counts only his nine companions and forgets to count himself). How is that statement different from the statement “You are Brahman”? Why does the latter statement require so many qualifications and so many auxiliaries, when the first statement does not? Nīścaldās does not answer this question, but one could imagine two possible answers. First, one might say that the self is a much subtler object of knowledge, or that errors about the self are much more deeply ingrained—indeed, for a Vedāntin, they go back across countless lifetimes—whereas the object of the statement “You are the tenth” is gross and not likely to be hindered by long-standing errors. A second possible answer would be that the statement “You are the tenth” *does* require similar qualifications and auxiliaries. One could imagine someone hearing these words but not getting it. (After all, the ten travelers don’t exactly seem like the ripest coconuts on the tree.) The tenth might think: “No, I can’t be the tenth, because the tenth didn’t make it across, but I’m right here.” In that

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<sup>448</sup> The phrase I translated above as “bearing the impressions” (*saṃskāra-viśiṣṭa*) is moreover related to discussions in Indian philosophy of language concerning how linguistic understanding is possible when the sounds of a word, as well as the words of a sentence, are perceived sequentially and not all at once. There is a parallel here, though Nīścaldās does not make it explicit: just as the words “The” and “fox” create impressions which are retained in the mind such that when one finally hears the word “runs,” the meaning of the sentence as a whole is grasped, likewise, an indirect knowledge of the meaning of the word “that” (Brahman) is retained until, through the *mahāvākya* which asserts one’s identity with that Brahman, the meaning of the whole is understood.

<sup>449</sup> For Nīścaldās, one’s initial knowledge of the meaning of the word Brahman is necessarily indirect, since it takes a “third-person” form: “Brahman is such-and-such,” as opposed to the direct knowledge of the *mahāvākyas*, which use the first- or second-person: “You are Brahman,” “I am Brahman.” The arising of the direct knowledge of one’s identity with Brahman presupposes the prior indirect knowledge of what Brahman is. See VS 1.23 comm., pp. 12–13.

case, it would be necessary for him to inquire into the meaning of the words “you” and “tenth,” and to reflect on their meaning and relationship to him. The impressions of this “inquiry” would then assist the flash of insight he would have when he did finally grasp the truth of the statement. Likewise, a “one-pointed” or at least concentrated mind is needed (the mind as material cause is *always* an auxiliary to cognitions, as Niścaldās points out) in order for the traveller to hear and understand the words in the first place. If, for example, he is distracted by his excessive grief, he might not at first register what he is being told. (Think of the movie cliché in which a hero’s friends think he has died, and of the “double-take” they make when they see him alive and well.)<sup>450</sup>

Note the temporal sequence in the passage from the *Vṛtti-prabhākar*: the arising of direct knowledge is *preceded* by hearing and reflection, whereas *nididhyāsana* seems to be simultaneous with the arising of knowledge, since it refers to a condition of the mind (viz., concentration) rather than to a preparatory practice. This seems different from Niścaldās’s position in VS chapter 1, where *nididhyāsana* is said to be a means for removing the obstacle of erroneous inclination. Once again, then, it seems that *nididhyāsana* can be understood in two ways. In its “lighter” form, *nididhyāsana* refers simply to concentration, of the kind referred to here, which must accompany hearing, and which is concomitant with the arising of liberating awareness. In its “heavier” form, *nididhyāsana* refers to a practice of developing and sustaining

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<sup>450</sup> Niścaldās makes a similar point with a story he tells in VS chapter 5 (vv. 18-124, pp. 123-135), of a righteous minister named Bharchu, wrongfully exiled through the machinations of his evil fellow ministers. These ministers circulate the rumor that Bharchu is dead, and when the king happens across him in a forest one day, although it is Bharchu standing before him in flesh and blood, the king thinks he is seeing a ghost. Here is an example, Niścaldās tells us, of direct awareness vitiated by error. The story ends there, but one could easily imagine the king doing a “double-take” were he to realize that Bharchu was actually still alive. The king’s problem, incidentally, was that he did not have a proper guru to guide him; instead, he listened to his lying ministers, who, Niścaldās explains, represent the opponents of Advaita, the evil *dvaita-vādin*s!

concentration, a practice which is not so much an auxiliary to cognition as a means for removing an obstacle to its arising.

To return to the passage from the *Vṛtti-prabhākar*: Nīścaldās goes on to give an extremely helpful example which I would argue provides a key to understanding the relationship of the triad of hearing, reflection, and contemplation (which, recall, remove intellectual faults) to the other two faults of mind, viz. impurity and instability:

For example, on the view that a reflection and the thing it reflects are one and the same, one can have a direct perception (*sākṣātkāra*) of the sun by means of the eyes as aided by a water-vessel, a mirror, etc. In such cases, the eyes by themselves are not capable of directly perceiving the sun. Nor will they be capable if the reflective surface (lit. the *upādhi*) is unsteady (*cañcala*) or turbid/tarnished (*malina*). But the eyes are capable of a direct perception of the sun etc. when aided by an unmoving (*nīścala*), taintless (*nirmala*) reflective surface. Similarly, with the help of a “mirror” in the form of a taintless, unmoving, impression-bearing mind, direct knowledge of Brahman is also possible through verbal testimony.<sup>451</sup>

I would like to suggest that the final sentence here provides a succinct, elegant account of Nīścaldās’s view of the path to liberation, weaving together the strands of *adhikāra*, *śravaṇa*, *manana*, *nididhyāsana*, *mahāvākya*, and *brahma-jñāna*. Two details in the language of the passage are worth noting. First, the two faults which Nīścaldās refers to elsewhere as *vikṣepa-doṣa* and *malina-doṣa* are here referred to as *cañcala* and *malina*. Normally I have been translating these as the faults of “instability” and “impurity,” but note that these English translations are privative forms, and the corresponding words “stability” and “purity” come across as positive qualities. Nīścaldās’s choice of words, perhaps deliberately, emphasizes that *cañcala* and *malina* are obstacles to be removed; the terms *nīś-cala* (lit. “without moving”) and *nir-mala* (“without stain”) simply describe a mind (or mirror) which is without those obstacles. The implication is that it is the very nature of a mirror to reflect; only when an external force moves the mirror around, or when external dust or rust spoils the clarity of the mirror’s face, does it cease to

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<sup>451</sup> VP 7.126, p. 420.



function as it should. It might require action on our part to steady the mirror, or to clean away the dust, just as for Niścaldās, the previous practice of meditation (*upāsanā*) and of *karmas* are required to remove the faults of instability and impurity. But once they are removed, the mind is simply functioning according to its nature.

Niścaldās’s description of the mind as mirror-like makes perfect sense in light of the discussion of material epistemology in the last chapter. There we saw that the mind is composed of *sattva*, so its very nature, when unimpeded by the activity of the other two *guṇas* (which correspond more or less directly to the faults of projection [*rajas/vikṣepa*] and impurity [*tamas/malina*]), is to give rise to awareness. Moreover, Niścaldās’s example is especially apt in that it calls to mind the doctrines of *ābhāsa-vāda* and *pratibimba-vāda*, which, recall also from the last chapter, he holds to be superior to the doctrine of delimitation. In every act of knowledge, there is a reflection of the pure light of consciousness, a reflection that takes place in the mirror-like mind. So too the knowledge of one’s identity with Brahman: the direct knowledge “I am Brahman,” which leads immediately to liberation, arises in the mind as a result of hearing a *mahāvākya*. But as this passage points out, for the awareness to amount to a direct knowledge—for the reality of Brahman to shine forth as directly and luminously as the sun in a mirror—the mind must be steady and pure. When the mind is properly prepared and all obstacles have been removed, the direct knowledge of Brahman cannot but shine forth.

#### *Remaining questions*

One of my tasks in this chapter has been to show how Niścaldās’s understanding of the path to liberation follows logically from the epistemology discussed in the last chapter. The prerequisites to the path can be explained in light of the discussion of “material epistemology”: having a pure and steady mind means having a mind in which *rajas* and *tamas*

have been tamed, allowing *sattva* to predominate. The practices of hearing and reflection can be explained in light of the discussion of “epistemic conflict”: engaging in inquiry means resolving apparent contradictions and thereby removing doubts. The practice of contemplation can be explained in light of either material epistemology or the notion of epistemic conflict. Whether *nididhyāsana* is interpreted as a state of concentration achieved through repeated inquiry (in which case all students must practice it) or as a state of concentration achieved through yogic-style meditation (in which case the highest level of students are exempt), in either case *nididhyāsana* involves stabilizing a flow of thoughts and hence suppressing *rājasā vṛttis*. This is the connection between *nididhyāsana* and material epistemology. At the level of instrumental epistemology, *nididhyāsana* is meant to counter “erroneous inclination” (*viparīta-bhāvanā*), which results from long-standing, firmly rooted perceptions of oneself as different from Brahman. These direct but erroneous perceptions, I would suggest, are a leading cause of the epistemic conflict one experiences when hearing the words “You are Brahman.” Epistemic conflict produces doubt, which blocks the functioning of *śabda-pramāṇa*; in order for the *pramāṇa* to function, the *vāsanās* giving rise to erroneous self-perception must be counteracted through a state of concentration, allowing an inwardly oriented *vṛtti* to take on the form of Brahman.

In addition to the problem of interpreting *nididhyāsana*, however, there are at least two other questions one could raise about the connections of Nīścaldās’s epistemology to his understanding of the path to liberation. The first question concerns the role of memory. By definition, *śabda-pramāṇa* only functions when there is contact of the ear with the words which are uttered; one must, after all, hear the testimony in order for it to produce knowledge. So imagine the guru says, “You are Brahman,” and then leads the student through the process of

inquiry, removing his doubts one by one. At the end of this process, does the guru need to say the words again? The answer for Niścaldās seems to be no; Tattvadr̥ṣṭi achieves liberation at the end of VS chapter 4 without hearing the *mahāvākya*. It seems enough for Tattvadr̥ṣṭi to have finally grasped the meaning of the words he initially heard. But doesn't this mean he is remembering the *mahāvākya* instead of hearing it? Here a problem arises, because for Niścaldās, memory cannot serve as a *pramāṇa*. For example, one might see a cat, or infer the existence of a cat from its meows, or hear about a cat from a reliable speaker; all of these are valid means of *knowing* the cat. Simply remembering a cat, however, does not count as a means of knowledge.

Niścaldās never addresses this problem, but a solution is readily available: memory is already an auxiliary in cases of *śabda-pramāṇa*, since one must remember the meanings of words in order for verbal testimony to produce knowledge. Likewise, memory of the words “You are Brahman” is a necessary auxiliary here. What liberates is not the memory as such, however; rather, in remembering the guru's words, the student is in effect pronouncing them anew. The student might pronounce the words aloud, as in the practice of “meditation grasping the ‘I,’” in which one repeats “I am Brahman,” or the student might pronounce them mentally; naturally, in the course of reflecting on the meaning of the words “I am Brahman,” one will turn those words over in one's head many times. Finally, one might note that the guru himself is not saying anything new when he pronounces a *mahāvākya*; he is simply repeating the words of the Vedas, which he himself has memorized.

The second remaining question cannot be answered as easily. That is the question of whether, in addition to the three faults of impurity, instability, and ignorance (the latter being subdivided into doubt and erroneous inclination), there are any other obstacles to the dawning

of knowledge. Niścaldās's three-fault system dovetails elegantly with his epistemology and his understanding of the path to liberation—that, at least, has been my argument. There is, however, an isolated passage in *The Ocean of Inquiry* that indicates that there might be additional obstacles.<sup>452</sup> The passage occurs in the context of a *pūrva-pakṣa* and so does not necessarily represent Niścaldās's view. Nonetheless, it does correspond to a view set forth by Vidyāranya and other Advaitins and is worth considering.

The passage mentions *prārabdha-karma*<sup>453</sup> as a possible obstacle: not any kind of *prārabdha-karma*, but only the distinctive kind that requires one or more additional births in order to exhaust itself. This kind of *karma* is said to be an obstacle to the arising of knowledge. What is unsatisfying about this point is that it seems a *post hoc* solution contrived to explain away the fact that some people do not in fact achieve liberation in life, even though all of the conditions seem to be there.<sup>454</sup> It is not at all clear how this idea of *prārabdha-karma* as an obstacle to knowledge would fit in with Niścaldās's epistemology. I suppose one would have to classify it as an instance of *malina-doṣa*, and a particularly persistent one at that, since it cannot be removed through any practices of purification; one can only wait patiently for it to run its course.

The same passage also mentions three other obstacles to knowledge: (1) attachment to sense-objects; (2) slowness of intellect; and (3) faith in the statements of proponents of duality

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<sup>452</sup> VS 7.16 comm., pp. 286–7.

<sup>453</sup> Advaitins distinguish three kinds of karma: past karma, which has already extinguished itself; future karma, which is yet to be set in motion; and present karma, which has already been set in motion but has yet to extinguish itself. The latter is known as *prārabdha-karma*. See VS 7.16 comm., p. 286.

<sup>454</sup> The idea of *prārabdha-karma* as an obstacle to liberation is also invoked to explain the curious case of Vāmadeva, who is mentioned in the Upanishads as having attained to knowledge of Brahman while still in the womb. See VS 7.16 comm., p. 287.

(*bheda-vādin*s). This list of obstacles appears to be taken from Vidyāranya's *Pañcadaśī*,<sup>455</sup> and it does not readily correspond to Nīścaldās's own discussion of obstacles to knowledge elsewhere in *The Ocean of Inquiry*. The first of the three obstacles could in any case be connected with *adhikāra* and with the idea of degrees of attachment, as discussed above. The third obstacle also seems to be connected with *adhikāra*, insofar as faith in one's guru and in the Vedas is one of the prerequisites. At the beginning of the dialogue in VS chapter 5, the middle disciple, Adṛṣṭi, is nonetheless tempted to consider non-Advaitin interpretations of the Upanishads; the guru corrects him firmly, calling "Madhva and the rest" deceivers and purveyors of impure doctrines.<sup>456</sup> Adṛṣṭi also manifests the second of the three obstacles mentioned here, namely "slowness of intellect,"<sup>457</sup> which I will discuss further in the next chapter. Conceivably there could be additional obstacles, too, which Nīścaldās does not mention. Pītāmbār, for instance, significantly expands the list in one of his glosses.<sup>458</sup> Can this list of obstacles be reconciled with Nīścaldās's epistemology and understanding of the path to liberation? I must leave this an open question. Whatever the answer, I believe it is clear that for Nīścaldās, the most *significant* obstacles are those of the three-fault system, which are removed through *karmas* and *upāsanās* (prior to undertaking inquiry), then through hearing, reflection, and contemplation.

## Conclusions

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<sup>455</sup> Cf. *Pañcadaśī* 9.43 (Swāhānanda pp. 389-90).

<sup>456</sup> VS 5.8-11, p. 122.

<sup>457</sup> VS 5.167 comm., p. 168.

<sup>458</sup> Gloss 318, VS p. 168. Pītāmbār is explaining the word "etc." (*ādi*) in the root text (VS 5.167 comm.: "He to whom, despite having inquired into the *mahāvākyas*, direct knowledge does not arise, on account of some obstacle of dull-mindedness etc. ...")

I have covered a great deal of material in this chapter and the previous chapter, and it is worth stepping back to review the main points, to see how my interpretation of Niścaldās offers a solution to the puzzle of Tattvadr̥ṣṭi. We saw in the last chapter that according to Niścaldās, the knowledge that liberates can be explained in terms of the *pramāṇa*-framework shared by almost all Indian philosophers. For Niścaldās, there is no such thing as knowledge produced apart from a *pramāṇa*. While it is true that the pure consciousness of Brahman is not produced by any *pramāṇa*, pure consciousness as such is not what liberates; what liberates is a particular act of knowledge—a correct, non-doubtful, awareness-bearing cognition (*yathārtha-niścaya-jñāna-vṛtti*)—that removes the veil of ignorance which covers pure consciousness. The *pramāṇa* in this case is an instance of *śabda*, or verbal testimony. First, through Vedic statements about the nature of Brahman one comes to an indirect awareness of the meaning of the word “Brahman.” Then, through a *mahāvākya* such as “You are Brahman,” one comes to a direct awareness of one’s identity with Brahman. This direct awareness, when free of doubt and other faults, is what removes the veil of individual ignorance, allowing the light of consciousness (which has always been present) to shine without obstacle. This is liberation.

As with all *pramāṇas*, however, in order for knowledge to arise, the means of knowledge must be properly functioning. For Niścaldās, knowledge (*pramā*) is a binary value, so to speak: either knowledge is produced or it is not. The proper functioning of a *pramāṇa* is like trying to start a car. Assuming everything is in working order, the car will start just fine. But any number of problems (*doṣa*) could prevent the car from starting. Only when the problems are fixed (*doṣa-nivṛtti*) will the car start. In the case of the Vedic *mahāvākyas*, there is clearly (from Niścaldās’s perspective) no fault in the *pramāṇa* itself. Instead, the faults which need to be eliminated are in the *pramātṛ*, or knower.

As we have seen in this chapter, there are three faults which prevent the *mahāvākyas* from functioning properly. The first is mental impurity, the second is mental instability, and the third is ignorance, which can be subdivided into doubt and erroneous inclination. When any of these faults are present, the *pramāṇa* will “misfire,” so to speak. Although one hears the words “You are Brahman,” they will not produce a state of knowledge. Rather, because of the presence of one or more faults, they will produce either a state of doubtful cognition (“Am I Brahman or not?”) or error (“No, that can’t be right. I’m not Brahman.”). The path to liberation is therefore one of removing faults. The *mahāvākyas* already provide the “technology” for liberation; we simply have to devote our attention to fixing the problems within ourselves in order for it to work properly.

The first two faults—mental impurity and mental instability—are removed through the practice of *karmas* and *upāsanās*. Nīścaldās expects seekers of liberation to have completed these practices (either in a previous life or in the present life) before coming to his text.<sup>459</sup> Once the faults of impurity and instability have been removed, the *adhikārin* (or at least the highest-level *adhikārin*<sup>460</sup>) is to leave behind all *karmas* and *upāsanās* and embark on the threefold path of *śravaṇa*, *manana*, and *nididhyāsana*. These three “means” remove the intellectual obstacles (doubt and erroneous inclination) which prevent the *pramāṇa* of the *mahāvākya* from functioning properly.

I have argued that *The Ocean of Inquiry* itself is essentially a work of *śravaṇa* and *manana*. The text alone does not suffice; one still needs a teacher, for reasons I will discuss in the next

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<sup>459</sup> Note that he does, however, provide some guidance in the final chapter (VS 7) on how to perform *upāsanās*, apparently for the sake of those who lack full *adhikāra* but are nonetheless reading his text.

<sup>460</sup> My goal in these two chapters has been to solve the puzzle of Tattvadṛṣṭi, who represents the highest level of student; according to Nīścaldās himself, *The Ocean of Inquiry* is primarily intended for this level of student (see VS 5.153 comm., p. 143). In the next chapter, we will see how he presents an alternative path—not based on inquiry—for lower-level students.

chapter. But the fundamentals of *śravaṇa* (which settles the import of the Upanishads) and *manana* (which provides supporting arguments and refutes the reality of difference) are contained fully in Nīścaldās's text. I have also argued that *vicāra* should be understood primarily as a process of intellectual inquiry embracing both *śravaṇa* and *manana*. Now the purpose of both *śravaṇa* and *manana* is simply to remove doubts. Thus, assuming the prerequisites (*adhikāra*) have indeed been met, the fundamental practice on the path to liberation—is it a “philosophical” practice? a “religious” practice? a “spiritual” practice?—is the removal of doubts through inquiry. On my interpretation, this practice is by its very nature dialectical, usually involving a student and a teacher, though it could also be carried out on one's own, so long as the dialectical exchange of *pakṣa* and *pūrva-pakṣa* is preserved. This dialectical process is what transforms “weak,” doubt-filled awareness into firm, liberating knowledge. I have shown that this process of inquiry is moreover parallel to the Nyāya understanding of the role of debate (*vāda*) as an indispensable means to the ascertainment (*nirṇaya*) of truth. By extension, the process of inquiry is intimately related to the dialectical method—rooted in oral debates and featuring *pūrva-pakṣas* and *siddhāntas*—of Indian philosophy in general.

If the central practice in *The Ocean of Inquiry* is inquiry, which is aimed at the removal of doubts, what of the practice of *nididhyāsana*, which Nīścaldās says removes erroneous inclinations? I have argued that Nīścaldās's view of *nididhyāsana* is not clear, and I have offered two possible interpretations. Position #1: *nididhyāsana* might refer to meditative practices which will not be necessary for all students: certainly not for the highest level of students, to whom Nīścaldās is primarily addressing his work, but for those who, while having partially met the prerequisite of a mind free of instability, are nonetheless to some degree deficient in



this regard and therefore require additional practices. Position #2: *nididhyāsana* might refer to the concentrated repetition of *śravaṇa* and *manana*, in which case it is already encoded within the text of *The Ocean of Inquiry* and does not refer to any additional practice. I also suggested a more general interpretation of *nididhyāsana* as a synonym of concentration, in which case one might accept a version of both position #1 and position #2, seeing them as two specific applications of this broader understanding.

I might add here—though a full discussion of this issue is beyond the scope of my dissertation—that the tension between Nīścaldās’s inclusion of yogic materials and his seeming disdain for these practices, or at least his lack of emphasis on them, captures a wider tension in the centuries-long tradition of Advaita Vedānta. I would argue that the tradition can roughly be divided into two camps: an intellectualist camp, which sees the essential practice on the path to liberation as inquiry (embodied in *śravaṇa* and *manana*), as opposed to a yogic camp, which sees the essential practice as meditation. These two views exist on a spectrum, such that individual thinkers somewhere in the middle might see either meditation or intellectual inquiry as the necessary precursor to the other. But the key to the debate is to ask which provides the ultimate means of realization: meditation or intellectual inquiry? In the early history of the tradition, this debate took the form of whether *śabda* could produce direct knowledge, or whether *prasaṃkhyāna* meditation was necessary for realization. The later tradition sided decisively with Śaṅkara’s and Sureśvara’s intellectualist, anti-*prasaṃkhyāna* position. But the tension reemerged later, as a result of ongoing syntheses between Yoga and Vedānta, with some writers insisting that yogic practices, culminating in a state of *nirvikalpa-samādhi*, are absolutely essential for liberation. Nīścaldās, like Śaṅkara and Sureśvara in the earlier debate, comes down on the intellectualist side: however it is to be interpreted,

*nididhyāsana* is clearly not the ultimate means of realization for Niścaldās; this distinction belongs to *śravaṇa*. The difference between the intellectualist and the meditation camps is nicely expressed in the addition of a fourth means to the classical triad of *śravaṇa*, *manana*, and *nididhyāsana*. Whereas Sadānanda, in the sixteenth-century classic the *Vedānta-sāra*, includes *samādhi* as a fourth, separate means, Niścaldās makes a point of explaining that *samādhi* is already included in *nididhyāsana* and is therefore not a separate means. Instead, he lists the *mahāvākyas* as the fourth, separate means to liberation (though they are also included as a part of *śravaṇa*, as he acknowledges).<sup>461</sup>

I began this study by asking: “What is inquiry? Why is it important? What does it look like in practice?” I hope that the answer to the first two questions is now clear: inquiry is a dialectical process of raising and removing doubts; it is important because for a properly qualified student, doubts are the chief obstacles standing between them and liberating knowledge. Thus we have a solution to the puzzle of Tattvadr̥ṣṭi: he is not liberated at the beginning of the chapter because in spite of hearing the words “You are Brahman,” his mind is full of doubts; by the end of the chapter, his doubts have been removed by the process of inquiry, and he achieves liberation. How exactly does this process of inquiry work? In the next chapter, I will turn from a discussion of the theory behind Niścaldās’s views (whether epistemological or soteriological) to a discussion of his pedagogical methods, or “inquiry in practice.” We will look at the particular ways in which the guru guides his three disciples along the sometimes winding path to liberation.

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<sup>461</sup> “*Samādhi* is simply an advanced state (*paripāka-avasthā*) of *nididhyāsana*, hence it is included in *nididhyāsana*. It is not a separate means” (VS 1.23 comm., p. 11). Cf. *Vedānta-sāra* 181 (Nikhilananda 1931, pp. 108-9).

## CHAPTER 6

### Inquiry in Practice

*The need for a teacher – The form of inquiry: Debates and dialogues – The case of Tattvadr̥ṣṭi – The case of Adr̥ṣṭi – The puzzle of Tarkadr̥ṣṭi – Conclusions*

In the last chapter, we saw that for Niścaldās the central practice on the path to liberation is inquiry, a dialectical process that aims at the removal of doubts. In this chapter we will consider what inquiry looks like in practice. My main argument is that the process of inquiry is enacted throughout Niścaldās’s text, especially in the dialogues of the guru with the three brothers. In the course of this argument, we will find confirmation of the close connection, suggested in the last chapter, between the process of inquiry and the standard debate form used by all Indian philosophers. We will also refine our understanding of inquiry by noting that the process is not the same for everyone but must be tailored to the needs of the student. For all of Niścaldās’s interest in seemingly abstract philosophy, his ultimate aim is pragmatic and pedagogical: he is less concerned with philosophical conclusions as such than with methods for removing the doubts of particular students and thereby leading them to liberation. In the case of the middle brother, Adr̥ṣṭi, we will even see that Niścaldās allows for the possibility of achieving liberation without following an intellectual path at all.

My method in this chapter will be to proceed through a series of “case studies” tracing the histories of the three brothers, all of whom find liberation (or at least the promise of liberation) in Niścaldās’s text. I will not be able to treat all the details of the teachings given to each brother; instead, I plan to focus on the non-philosophical portions of *The Ocean of Inquiry*, which have been neglected by the few others who have written on Niścaldās. In particular, I will focus on the verses which tell the *story* of the three brothers, rather than the verses and commentary which set forth the teachings of Advaita Vedānta. Most of these narrative verses

come in the form of linking or framing verses, which set up the more didactic, content-rich verses and their commentary. Although these linking verses contain more than a simple “So-and-so said,” they are nonetheless short and easy to overlook unless we specifically focus our attention on them. I will also discuss the philosophical debates that constitute the majority of Niścaldās’s text, but I will focus on the form rather than the content of these debates.

In the course of these case studies, I will also address a new, important puzzle in *The Ocean of Inquiry*. I began this three-chapter study with what I termed “the puzzle of Tattvadr̥ṣṭi,” raising the question of why, given Niścaldās’s epistemology, Tattvadr̥ṣṭi is not immediately liberated on hearing the *mahāvākya* from his guru. I hope the solution to this puzzle is sufficiently clear by now. In this chapter, in the course of the three case studies, we will encounter a second puzzle, the puzzle of Tarkadr̥ṣṭi. As we shall see, Tarkadr̥ṣṭi, the youngest of the three brothers, is classified by Niścaldās as the lowest level of qualified student. Yet he turns out to receive what Niścaldās identifies as the highest level of Vedāntic teaching. Moreover, Tarkadr̥ṣṭi ends up attaining liberation in this very life, while the middle brother, Adr̥ṣṭi, in spite of his higher level of qualification, receives only the promise of liberation in a future life. How are we to account for these discrepancies? As S. Bhuvaneshwari has noted in her dissertation on the Sanskrit translation of *The Ocean of Inquiry*, “the kinds of *adhikārīs* are vaguely presented and the basis of classification is unclear. Moreover, the line of division between each aspirant is thin and often overlapping.”<sup>462</sup> Understanding the basis for Niścaldās’s classification of the three levels of student is an extremely important problem to solve, since it is the organizing principle of Niścaldās’s text. I believe that the method described above—attending carefully to the narrative details rather than just the philosophical

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<sup>462</sup> Bhuvaneshwari 2010, p. 69.

content of each dialogue—yields a satisfying solution to the puzzle of Tarkadr̥ṣṭi and the larger problem of Niścaldās’s classification of levels of students.

### *The need for a teacher*

In the previous chapter, I spoke without distinction of students who are qualified to engage in the study of Vedānta, and in this I was following Niścaldās’s own discussion of *adhikāra* in chapters 1 and 2 of *The Ocean of Inquiry*. In VS chapter 4, however—the chapter in which the tale of the three brothers is begun—Niścaldās’s offers an important refinement to his earlier discussion of *adhikāra*, noting that there are in fact differences in level among qualified students. In accordance with Niścaldās’s approach, I have waited until this chapter, after laying out the general path to liberation in the previous chapter, to discuss specific differences in the path as followed by different students.

Niścaldās explains that there are three divisions of *adhikārins*: highest (*uttama*), middle (*madhyama*), and lowest (*kaniṣṭha*), corresponding allegorically to the three brothers, eldest, middle, and youngest. Niścaldās never clearly explains what the difference between the three levels is, however, and only in the case of the lowest level does he indicate any basis for the classification: the lowest level student, he tells us, is one who is full of doubts. I will say more about the connection between doubt and *adhikāra* later, when we come to the case of Tarkadr̥ṣṭi, but it is worth noting in advance the continuity with my argument in the last chapter, that the path to liberation centers around the removal of doubts. As we saw there, *adhikāra* for the study of Vedānta involves having a mind that is already purified and stabilized through prior practices of purification and meditation; the remaining obstacles are intellectual.

The introduction of different levels of qualified students leads to another important refinement to the earlier discussion of the path to liberation: not only must the student be properly qualified, there must also be a qualified teacher. For Nīścaldās, the study of Vedānta is never a path of self-study; he insists on several occasions that *The Ocean of Inquiry* must be studied under the guidance of a teacher.<sup>463</sup> Although Nīścaldās never makes the point explicitly, it seems clear that one reason a teacher is needed is precisely because of the differences in students. It is not enough simply to have the teachings of Vedānta; these teachings must be tailored to the level of the student. Just as the three brothers in *The Ocean of Inquiry* need the guru, all students need a teacher who is capable of recognizing their needs and adapting his<sup>464</sup> teachings accordingly.

Nīścaldās devotes an entire chapter (VS chapter 3) to the teacher-student relationship.<sup>465</sup> The placement of the chapter is fitting: it serves as a bridge between the two introductory chapters, which discuss *adhikāra*, and the chapters recounting the tale of the three brothers. The chapter opens with a verse suggesting, interestingly, that *The Ocean of Inquiry* was intended to be taught orally as well as to be read by students themselves. In either case, however, it is necessary to have a teacher: “The qualified student who reads (*paḍai*) or

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<sup>463</sup> On Advaita Vedānta as a way of teaching, see Cenker 1983 and especially Hirst 2005. See also Bhuvaneshwari’s dissertation (2010), which highlights “the pedagogical concern” of Nīścaldās and of Vāsudeva Brahmendra Sarasvatī, who translated the *Vicār-sāgar* into Sanskrit.

<sup>464</sup> I use “he” and “his” in the context of summarizing or reconstructing Nīścaldās’s own thought. Although pronouns do not show gender in Hindi, verb endings do, and they are always masculine for Nīścaldās. Women appear in only one passage in *The Ocean of Inquiry*—a passage which might, with literal exactness, be described as “misogynist,” insofar as part of its explicit purpose is to incite a state of disgust (and thereby detachment) towards the female body (5.28b-40, pp. 125-7; cf. also 5.52-89, pp. 128-132). It is perhaps worth noting, however, that nowhere in the discussion either of *adhikāra* or of the characteristics of an ideal teacher does Nīścaldās specifically mention being male as a prerequisite; nor does he mention caste. In the *Vṛtti-prabhākar*, when the question of caste and qualification arises, he affirms the position that “the position of the *sāstras* is that all human beings have the right (*adhikāra*) to knowledge of the real (*tattva-jñāna*)” (7.111, p. 493).

<sup>465</sup> The word for “student” is *śiṣya*, which could also be translated as “disciple.” For “teacher,” Nīścaldās most often uses *guru*, which I have left untranslated when referring to the specific character in the dialogues but which I usually render as “teacher” in more general contexts. Nīścaldās himself occasionally substitutes *ācārya* for *guru*.

listens (*sunai*) to this book under a knowledgeable teacher (*jñān-sahit guru saim*) will find the path to liberation.”<sup>466</sup> Niścaldās goes on to explain that just as a student must possess certain qualifications before engaging in the study of Vedānta, a teacher must also meet certain prerequisites. In verses 3-4, Niścaldās lists five characteristics of a true teacher: (1) he must be well versed in the meanings of the Vedas, (2) he must know that Brahman and the self are one, (3) he must be capable of destroying the “five modes of duality” which present themselves to the minds of students, (4) he must be capable of bringing students to know Brahman, and (5) he must teach that the world is an illusion.<sup>467</sup>

One might be surprised to learn that for Niścaldās, even if a person is liberated, this does not necessarily qualify him to be a teacher. Niścaldās sets the bar of qualification extremely high: liberation-in-life is a necessary but not sufficient condition for becoming a teacher, as he explains in his commentary to the list of five characteristics. The first two characteristics, as they appear in the verse, seem straightforward: the true teacher must “be well versed in the meanings of the Veda” and must “know that Brahman and the self are one.”<sup>468</sup> But as the commentary explains, this means that one must both possess liberating knowledge *and* have thoroughly studied Vedānta. “He who has studied the Vedas but is not established in knowledge (*jñāna-niṣṭha*) is not a teacher,” Niścaldās writes.<sup>469</sup> Indirect or weak awareness does not suffice; the teacher must have realized Brahman directly for himself. Niścaldās continues:

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<sup>466</sup> VS 3.1, p. 56.

<sup>467</sup> VS p. 56.

<sup>468</sup> VS 3.3, p. 56.

<sup>469</sup> VS 3.4 comm., p. 57.

He who is established in knowledge but who has not studied the Vedas is also not a teacher. Such a one may be liberated himself, but this does not make him fit to impart instruction [to others]. Why not? He lacks the arguments (*yukti*) necessary to clear away the doubts of the one seeking knowledge.<sup>470</sup>

In the last chapter we considered the path of liberation from the perspective of the student; this passage gives us the perspective of the teacher. It is not enough for a teacher to possess a direct, “mystical” insight. He must also be trained in the use of arguments, because these are what will remove his students’ doubts. Recall that for fully qualified students, the path to liberation involves the triad of hearing, reflection, and contemplation. Hearing and reflection were both defined in terms of the use of *yukti*, reasoning or arguments. Hence it is clear that the teacher must be well versed in the use of *yukti* in order to guide the student along the path. It is not enough to have had the liberating experience of Brahman; in order to be a teacher, one must also have “philosophical” training.

The passage quoted above is important not only for what it tells us about the teacher but also for what it tells us about his method of teaching: he uses arguments/reasoning (*yukti*) to clear away his students’ doubts. The passage thus supports my argument in the last chapter that the central practice on the path to liberation is the removal of doubts through a process of inquiry. Read in this light, the passage quoted above is simply specifying that teachers must be capable of guiding students through this process. The commentary goes on to say that a teacher who has not studied the Vedas is admittedly capable of teaching “seekers of the highest disposition (*uttama-saṃskāra*), whose minds are untroubled by doubts.”<sup>471</sup> This line provides additional support to my hypothesis, explained further below, that the distinctions among levels of seekers is based on a combination of (a) their intellectual aptitude and (b)

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<sup>470</sup> VS 3.4 comm., p. 57.

<sup>471</sup> VS 3.4 comm., p. 57.



their tendency to doubt. Without doubts, there would be no need for arguments to remove the doubts. In the case of seekers of the very highest level (higher even than *Tattvadr̥ṣṭi*), the *mahāvākya* alone is capable of removing ignorance and yielding liberation.<sup>472</sup> This kind of teaching can be given by someone who is not well versed in argument; “but he is not fit to instruct everyone,” Nīścaldās concludes, “hence he is not a teacher.”<sup>473</sup> For Nīścaldās, a teacher (*guru*) is by definition someone who has studied the use of arguments. This passage also implies that a teacher must be capable of teaching students of differing capacities; he must be flexible in responding to their needs. Some students will need very little teaching, because their minds are relatively untroubled by doubts, while others will need much more.

The commentary on the five characteristics of a teacher also uses the word *yukti* in its paraphrase of the third characteristic: “he should be capable of removing, by means of various arguments (*yukti*), the five kinds of distinction which suggest themselves to the minds of his students.”<sup>474</sup> Here we have a reference to the centuries-long, acrimonious debates between Advaitins and Dvaitins, also known as *bheda-vādin*s, or proponents of difference, who teach that there are real differences between (1) the *jīva* and the Lord, (2) *jīvas* themselves, (3) the *jīva* and inanimate things, (4) the Lord and inanimate things, and (5) inanimate things themselves.<sup>475</sup> It is worth noting that these arguments are often extremely complex and philosophically technical, couched in the language of Navya-Nyāya—so again, the bar for an ideal teacher is set very high. Nīścaldās’s ideal teacher does not use these arguments for the

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<sup>472</sup> Śaṅkara himself makes this point in *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* 4.1.2.

<sup>473</sup> VS 3.4 comm., p. 57.

<sup>474</sup> VS 3.4 comm., p. 57.

<sup>475</sup> The doctrine of *pañcabheda* (“five (kinds of) difference”) is central to the *dvaitin* philosophy of Madhvācārya; see Sarma 2011, p. 223-233.

sake of refuting other schools, however, but for the sake of training the minds of his disciples; the intention is pedagogical rather than polemical.

The fourth characteristic also brings out the pragmatic, pedagogical role of the teacher: he should be able to cause students to realize Brahman directly for themselves. As I will demonstrate through a study of the teaching methods of the guru in Nīścaldās's dialogue, a good teacher will make use of a range of strategies and techniques to lead his students to realization. The fifth and final characteristic is that the guru should teach that all of *saṃsāra* is false. Notably, however, the teacher need not be a renunciate. "Such a one the wise call a teacher," Nīścaldās's commentary on the five characteristics concludes, "not one whose robes are dyed in ochre."<sup>476</sup> Later in the chapter he states explicitly that a teacher can be either a renunciate or a householder; in either case, the student is to serve the teacher as if he were the Lord.<sup>477</sup>

A final reason why a teacher is necessary is that the teacher is the one who discerns when a student is ready to begin studying Vedānta in the first place. In accordance with the traditional prescriptions of the *śāstras*, Nīścaldās says, a student should dwell with, or near, his guru "for a long time," performing chores for him and living off alms.<sup>478</sup> Serving the guru, Nīścaldās explains, helps to purify the mind<sup>479</sup>; the implication seems to be that a student might seek out a guru while still working to fulfill the basic conditions of *adhikāra*, namely freedom from the faults of impurity and instability. Nīścaldās also mentions that a guru might sometimes "test the student's faith" by withholding food from him, presumably to see how he

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<sup>476</sup> VS 3.4 comm., p. 57.

<sup>477</sup> VS 3.17 comm., p. 62 and VS 3.14-5, pp. 61-2.

<sup>478</sup> VS 3.19, p. 62.

<sup>479</sup> VS 3.11 comm., p. 61.

responds.<sup>480</sup> To summarize: a teacher is necessary to discern when a student is fit to begin studying Vedānta; a teacher is necessary to guide one through the arguments that will dispel doubts; and a teacher is necessary to recognize the needs and limitations of each student and to adapt the teachings accordingly.

The idea that multiple expressions of doctrine are needed for different people is perhaps most familiar to scholars of religion through the Buddhist notion of *upāya*, a teaching “strategy” provisionally adopted by a skilled teacher. Sthaneshwar Timalisina has suggested that an “*upāyic* approach” was adopted by Advaita Vedāntins as well: “[T]he same issue can be understood differently, depending upon the level of an aspirant. Rather than being ‘the’ approach to determine ontological truth, the concept of DS [*drṣṭi-sṛṣṭi*] or other similar Advaita thoughts appear to be different methods applied in order to transform subjective awareness.”<sup>481</sup> Nīścaldās would most certainly agree. In a discussion of the differences between the doctrines of delimitation, reflection, and semblance (dealt with briefly in my chapter on epistemology), Nīścaldās makes it clear that he sees the doctrine of delimitation as suffering from weaknesses. Nonetheless, he believes it can still be useful for some:

Since *all* of the [various] approaches (*prakriyā*) to Vedānta are for the sake of causing one to know the non-dual self, whichever approach gives rise to realization for the seeker of knowledge, that very [approach] is correct (*samīcīna*) for him.<sup>482</sup>

This position need not imply relativism: Nīścaldās immediately goes on to say that the doctrine of semblance is nonetheless the “main” or “primary” (*mukhya*) approach, since it is the doctrine taught by Śaṅkara (“the Commentator”) in the *Vākya-vṛtti* and *Upadeśa-sāhasrī*.<sup>483</sup>

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<sup>480</sup> VS 3.20 and comm., p. 63.

<sup>481</sup> Timalisina 2006, p. 200.

<sup>482</sup> VS 6B.42 comm., p. 275.

<sup>483</sup> VS 6B.42 comm., p. 275.

Elsewhere Niścaldās likewise establishes a hierarchy between the doctrines of delimitation, reflection, and semblance on the one hand, and the doctrine of pure idealism (*dr̥ṣṭi-sṛṣṭi-vāda*) on the other; the latter is described as the ultimate conclusion or “highest position” (*uttama-siddhānta*) within Vedānta.<sup>484</sup> But the absence of dogmatic insistence on this point is evident in the fact that pure idealism is only alluded to in passing in the guru’s teaching to Tattvadṛṣṭi (who is, after all, the highest level of disciple), which shows that even if pure idealism is the highest statement of Vedāntic doctrine, it is not necessary for liberation. In another passage, Niścaldās addresses the question of whether there is a single ignorance (Prakāśātman’s position in the *Vivaraṇa*), or whether ignorance is multiple (Vācaspati’s position in the *Bhāmatī*). Niścaldās asserts the superiority of the *Vivaraṇa* view, and he offers a refutation of Vācaspati’s view, which he labels “incoherent” (*asaṅga*) and “incorrect” (*asamīcīna*). But he concludes by stepping back and emphasizing that what matters most is liberation, and that even Vācaspati’s doctrine may be accepted if it is pedagogically helpful:

Should the doctrine of multiple ignorances, after the manner of Vācaspati, enter into anyone’s mind, it, too, [can] be a means (*upāya*) to the knowledge of non-duality. There is no need to insist (*āgraha*) on refuting it. Whatever leads the seeker of knowledge to the realization (*bodha*) of non-duality should be followed in a person’s mind.<sup>485</sup>

Here Niścaldās himself uses the word *upāya*. As we shall see, the principle set forth here—“Whatever leads the seeker of knowledge to the realization of non-duality, that is what should be followed”—is the guiding principle behind the guru’s teaching in *The Ocean of Inquiry*.

### *The form of inquiry: Debates and dialogues*

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<sup>484</sup> VS 6A.7 comm., p. 193.

<sup>485</sup> VS 5.154 comm., pp. 146-7. —Pītāmbār’s gloss (293, VS p. 147) on this passage quotes a well-known verse by Sureśvara expressing a similar thought: *yayā yayā bhavet puṁsām vyutpattiḥ pratyagātmani / sā saiva prakriyeha syāt sādhiḥ sā ca vyavasthitiḥ* [or: *cānavasthitiḥ*] // (The verse is from the *Vārtika* on the *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣadbhāṣya*, 1.4.402; Subrahmanya Shastri 1982, p. 342. Comans [2000] translates: “Whichever way people can come to the clear knowledge of the inner-Self would be a good way here. But that way is not fixed” [p. 355].)

Inquiry is necessarily dialectical, involving a back and forth between two sides. As Pītāmbār suggests in his definition of inquiry (quoted in the last chapter), the two sides can either be a teacher and a student (*guru-śiṣya*) or simply two voices in a debate (*pakṣa-pratipakṣa*). In either case, what is important is that there be two positions, corresponding to the two possibilities (*koṭis*, lit. “corners”) between which a doubting mind wavers: “Is it the case that *p*, or not?” In the last chapter, I pointed out that the process of inquiry is comparable to the Nyāya view of *vāda*, or the kind of “debate” one engages in not to defeat an opponent but rather to reach *nirṇaya*, or “ascertainment” of a matter concerning which there is doubt. In this section I would like to suggest more broadly that the method of inquiry is fundamentally the same philosophical method one finds throughout Indian philosophy. There is nothing unique about the *method* of inquiry, I would argue; what sets it apart is simply its object, viz. one’s identity with Brahman. For Niścaldās, inquiry means inquiry into the meaning of the *mahāvākya*, and this kind of inquiry is unique to Vedānta. But the method of inquiring into the meaning of the *mahāvākya* is, on my interpretation, fundamentally the same as the dialectical method one encounters in all Indian philosophical works, as well as in other works composed in “*śāstric*” style.

This dialectical method is based on one general feature and several specific conventions. The general feature is the contrast of a *siddhānta*, or “established position”—i.e. the conclusion for which one is arguing—with an opponent’s position, identified as the *pūrva-pakṣa*, literally the “initial side” or *prima facie* position. There is some flexibility in the placement of the *pūrva-pakṣa*. As its name suggests, it typically comes first; before stating one’s own position, one states the opponent’s case as fairly and strongly as possible. Sometimes the *pūrva-pakṣa* is preceded by a question for investigation—in which case the form is rather like

the *quaestiones disputatae* of European scholasticism. Sometimes, too, the *siddhānta* comes first, followed by the objection. Sometimes philosophers will even introduce multiple *pūrva-pakṣas*, letting them argue among themselves, so to speak, before the *siddhāntin*—the voice upholding the *siddhānta*—comes in to resolve the debate. These variations in form are secondary, however; what is important is that there is always a *siddhānta* and always an opponent who seeks to refute the *siddhānta*.

In addition to this general feature of Indian philosophy, there are several specific conventions reflecting the origins of this method in oral debates. These conventions arise from the use of direct rather than indirect discourse to represent an opponent’s position. Where an English-speaking philosopher might introduce an objection indirectly (“Here one might object that my position does not account for the fact that ...”), the Sanskrit-speaking philosopher tends to give the objector a direct voice (“Your position does not account for the fact that ...”). One of the most common particles used to introduce the opponent’s voice is *nanu*, which means “but,” and which is so regularly used to introduce objections to a *siddhānta* that it is often simply translated as “Objection” followed by a colon. Another common way of introducing an objection is to conclude an opponent’s words with *iti cet*, literally meaning, “If thus,” i.e., “If someone were to say X, [then the reply would be],” or with *iti āśaṅkya* (“[If] one has this doubt”) or *iti ākṣipta* (“[If] one objects thus”).<sup>486</sup>

It is worth noting that Nīścaldās almost never uses the word *ākṣepa*, or objection, to describe an opponent’s position, and he almost never uses *nanu* to introduce an objection. Consistently throughout *The Ocean of Inquiry*, the opponent’s position is instead introduced with the word *śaṅkā*, meaning “doubt,” or occasionally with a synonym such as *saṃśaya* or

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<sup>486</sup> For more on the conventions of scholastic Sanskrit, see Tubb and Boose 2007.

*saṃdeha*. Again and again he introduces or concludes an opponent's position with the words: "Such a doubt might arise" (*aisī śaṅkā hovai hai*) or "Someone might raise such a doubt" (*aisī koū śaṅkā karai hai*). His favorite formula for rejecting an opponent's position is "This doubt does not make sense" (*aisī śaṅkā nahīṃ bantī*). And one of the few times he uses the word *nanu*, in a verse, it is glossed in his commentary as *saṃdeh kā vācak*, "denoting doubt."<sup>487</sup> His choice of words reveals how central doubt and the process of its removal are to Niścaldās's vision of the path to liberation. It also serves to emphasize his pedagogical rather than polemical purpose. Although the debates in *The Ocean of Inquiry* take a polemical form, they are not meant to convince outsiders. Niścaldās makes it clear that his text is intended only for students already committed to the teachings of Vedānta. When the text engages in disputes with others schools, the goal is to remove internal doubts and not to defeat any outside opponent: the opponent is one's own mind.<sup>488</sup>

I mentioned that Niścaldās's favorite phrase for rejecting an opponent's position is "This doubt does not make sense." The phrase *nahīṃ bantī*, "doesn't make sense," or more loosely, "is unreasonable" (cf. Sanskrit *na yujyate*), is sometimes replaced with *nahīṃ saṃbhav*, meaning "is not possible" or "is not plausible." Here we have a further verbal connection worth noting: the technical term which Niścaldās uses for doubt in his discussion of obstacles on the path to liberation is *asambhāvanā*, or impossibility. When the *siddhānta* seems "impossible" for some reason or another, the result is doubt. The solution is to show that the problem lies not with the *siddhānta* but with the supposed impossibility, thereby turning the

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<sup>487</sup> VS 6B.21 comm., p. 254.

<sup>488</sup> I am grateful to Jeremy Manheim for suggesting this point to me in conversation several years ago, before I began work on Niścaldās. He had once asked a Tibetan lama why Tibetan Buddhist works include refutations of Sāṃkhya, when there were never Sāṃkhyas in Tibet. The lama replied that Sāṃkhya is not just a school but a tendency of thinking; the point is to refute the Sāṃkhya within.

doubt on its head. In this way the *siddhānta* is strengthened, and the doubt (*asambhāvanā*) is shown itself to be impossible (*asambhav*).

This debate form is used throughout *The Ocean of Inquiry*, even before we are introduced to the guru and the three brothers. In the first chapter, for example, a doubt is raised early on about Nīścaldās's claim that the purpose of *The Ocean of Inquiry* is to lead students to liberation. Nīścaldās defines liberation as the removal of suffering and the attainment of bliss, which leads to an objection: if one is already Brahman, why speak of attaining bliss? Shouldn't one be blissful already? The objection and its answer are given in a verse which Nīścaldās labels "a verse of doubt and reply." The first two lines express the doubt; note the accusation of *impossibility*:

[1.27a] The Vedas proclaim that the essential nature of the *jīva* is [already] bliss; to speak of attaining bliss is impossible.

A thing that is unattained may be attained, but how could one imagine attaining the already attained?<sup>489</sup>

The reply is introduced with a line that provides a key to understanding the practice of inquiry: "Let not even the least trace of such a doubt harm one's faith; through the grace of the guru, let the flaw in this argument be thoroughly understood."<sup>490</sup> Liberation is dependent on *śabda-pramāṇa*, which presupposes trust in the reliability of the Vedas, and in turn trust in the reliability of the guru, who communicates their teachings. When the student's mind is led astray by "the flaw in the argument" (or "bad reasoning," *ku-tarka*), however, doubts arise. Since even the slightest trace of doubt is enough of a fault (*doṣa*) to prevent the arising of liberating knowledge, it is essential to remove the doubt. For this, the student must turn to his teacher. Note that the character of the guru has not been introduced yet; the role of teacher is

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<sup>489</sup> VS p. 17.

<sup>490</sup> VS 1.27b, p. 17.



played by Niścaldās himself, who goes on to remove the doubt by providing an example: attaining the bliss of liberation is comparable, he says, to a person looking for a lost bracelet; if the person eventually looks down and realizes it was on his wrist the whole time, he will say he has “found” the bracelet. So it makes sense, concludes Niścaldās, to speak of attaining something already attained, and the purpose of *The Ocean of Inquiry* is thereby shown to be possible (*sambhavai hai*) after all.<sup>491</sup>

The second chapter provides a further, extended example of the use of the debate form in *The Ocean of Inquiry*. In VS chapter 1, in the course of discussing the four *anubandhas*,<sup>492</sup> Niścaldās includes a few objections and replies, but the chapter is mostly devoted to exposition. The second chapter, by contrast, is devoted entirely to objections and replies. Niścaldās himself describes this process as “inquiry,” in the chapter’s opening verse:

[2.1] In this second chapter, I will now set forth at length  
The inquiry into the *anubandhas* which was begun in the first chapter.<sup>493</sup>

He then launches into an extended *pūrva-pakṣa*, spanning thirteen pages, raising doubts about each of the four *anubandhas*. The second half of the chapter then responds to each objection in turn. The “inquiry” to which Niścaldās refers thus consists of carefully considering arguments for and against a position, and not simply setting forth one’s own position. In the tale of the three brothers, the guru takes the same approach: he is not so much a lecturer as a dialectician, leading his students through the process of inquiry by encouraging them to raise doubts and then responding to their doubts one by one, as we will see in the case studies to follow.

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<sup>491</sup> VS 1.27 comm., p. 18.

<sup>492</sup> The four *anubandhas* are qualification (*adhikāra*), subject (*viṣaya*), purpose (*prayojana*), and relation (*sambandha*).

<sup>493</sup> VS p. 20.

The debate form used throughout *The Ocean of Inquiry* is closely related to the dialogue form used in the tale of the three brothers. Indeed, the dialogue form can be interpreted as a special kind of debate, expressed through a narrative, between a teacher and a student. This interpretation of dialogue (*saṃvāda*) as a more “fleshed out,” narrative form of the more general debate (*vāda*) form helps to contextualize Nīścaldās’s own explanation of his choice to write dialogues: “When things are expressed in the form of a dialogue between guru and disciple, comprehension dawns easily on the hearer,” he writes in VS chapter 3.<sup>494</sup> My argument is that the dialogue form used by Nīścaldās is simply a more accessible form of the debate style he uses elsewhere in the text and throughout his prose commentary. The dialogue form has several advantages. To begin with, the various “voices” are easier to keep separate, and the reader’s attention is more easily held when there is a “real” person posing the various objections, instead of a series of disconnected, disembodied objectors. The dialogue form also helps to stress the pedagogical nature of the process: by couching the debate as a dialogue between a teacher and a student, it is clear that we are dealing with *vāda*, or truth-seeking debate, rather than debate for the sake of victory.<sup>495</sup> Another advantage of the dialogue form is that it emphasizes the need for a teacher. The debate form and the dialogue form are both written forms, of course, which means it is possible to study them without a teacher. But the presence of a fictional teacher in the dialogue is a symbol of the need for a real teacher to guide one through the maze of doubt. Finally, the dialogue form is an especially apt form for expressing Nīścaldās’s view that different students have different needs. With the debate form, there is the danger of de-contextualizing the arguments and teachings, seeing them as

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<sup>494</sup> VS 3.2 comm., p. 56.

<sup>495</sup> Matilal 1998, p. 2: “It is said that the participants in this kind of debate [i.e. *vāda*] were the teacher and the student, or the students themselves, belonging to the same school.” (Cited in Nicholson 2010, p. 78.)

intended for some kind of universal audience; with the dialogue form, we are reminded that the teachings are always directed at particular students.

The idea that teaching should be tailored to the student is exactly what we should expect given Nīścaldās's view of inquiry as a process of removing doubts. The three students we meet in Nīścaldās's dialogues raise different doubts, and their very classification into different levels rests at least in part on their disposition to raise doubts. As we will see momentarily, the guru accordingly answers their questions in different ways and applies various strategies while teaching them. The organization of *The Ocean of Inquiry* around teacher-student dialogues, and moreover around three different dialogues with different kinds of students, leads to an absolutely essential point: just as doubts are different for different people, so too the process of inquiry will be different for different people. Inquiry is not about proceeding systematically under a universal standard of rationality but about removing the particular stumbling-blocks and sticking-points that particular disciples have. Nīścaldās is not writing for a disembodied, universal audience, but for real students with real doubts. One might even go so far as to say that inquiry is not so much about determining, objectively, what the ultimate truth is—or rather, what the most adequate verbal formulation of truth is—instead, it is about determining, subjectively, what will remove doubts. This is not to say that anything goes, of course; there is still objective truth. What the teacher is most concerned with is not the statement of that truth per se, however, but the statement of it in a saving way. Nīścaldās is a pragmatist of sorts: his goal is not to be right, but to liberate. A student cannot be liberated through incorrect teachings. But not all correct teachings are helpful for all people; different strategies and formulations will be necessary depending on the student's abilities and needs. For example, some will have stronger attachments to sense objects; others will have

studied non-Vedāntic philosophies and have particular doubts that others will not have. Some will have fewer doubts, others will have almost an endless stream of doubts. We will see these differences illustrated in the following three sections, as we turn to our “case studies” of each of the three brothers.

### *The case of Tattvadr̥ṣṭi*

*The Ocean of Inquiry* begins, after the three introductory chapters, with a verse introducing the tale of the three brothers:

[4.1] Now will I set forth in verse a new dialogue between a guru and his disciples.  
Seekers of knowledge who study it will become skilled in inquiry.<sup>496</sup>

Pītāmbar glosses the word “new” (*navīna*) to mean that Nīścaldās himself composed the dialogue, instead of reproducing dialogues from the Upanishads, the Purāṇas, or other “old works.”<sup>497</sup> But I do not think it would be going too far to read a stronger claim of originality here. For there is a very real sense in which Nīścaldās is doing something unprecedented by presenting the dialogues of a single guru with multiple disciples. The form is well chosen: not only does it allow Nīścaldās to cover a wide range of material, it aptly illustrates both the various needs of students and the various pedagogical approaches a teacher should take in answering those needs.

Nīścaldās assures his readers that those who study his dialogues will become “skilled in inquiry” (*vicāra-pravīna*). It is my hope that by studying his dialogues—focusing especially on their form and not just their content—we, too, will become “skilled” in identifying what inquiry looks like in practice. The basic form is simple. With each brother, the guru begins by setting forth a *siddhānta*. Each of the three princes then has a chance to play the opponent,

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<sup>496</sup> VS p. 64.

<sup>497</sup> Gloss 133, VS p. 64.

expressing his doubts about the guru's teaching. Indeed, the guru openly encourages them to express their doubts, since doubts cannot be removed without their first being aired. The process of inquiry, as it plays out in the dialogues, thus has a threefold structure: a statement of the *siddhānta*, the expression of a doubt, and the guru's attempt to remove the doubt.

To see how this process works more concretely, I will begin with the case of Tattvadr̥ṣṭi. We can start by looking more closely at the opening exchange I discussed in my chapter on epistemology, when I called attention to the puzzle of why Tattvadr̥ṣṭi is not immediately liberated on hearing the words "You are Brahman." Recall that the guru begins by telling Tattvadr̥ṣṭi that he is Brahman; this is the *siddhānta*. Since Tattvadr̥ṣṭi is an *adhikārin* of the highest rank, we know that he is free of the faults of impurity and instability of mind. Yet the *mahāvākya* fails to produce the knowledge "I am Brahman," and this failure implies that there must still be some *doṣa* in Tattvadr̥ṣṭi's mind: either the fault of doubt or the fault of erroneous inclination. His question is perhaps a result of both: it certainly expresses a doubt; it is also a result of his inclination to believe, erroneously, that he is not in fact Brahman. Significantly, the problem of erroneous inclination is not dealt with in the dialogue. For Tattvadr̥ṣṭi, whose mind is already perfectly concentrated, it suffices for the guru to remove his doubts in order to remove his erroneous notions about the self.

The process of inquiry proper begins with Tattvadr̥ṣṭi's response to the guru's assertion that he is Brahman. He asks: "If I am [already] of the nature of bliss, why do I take pleasure in [sense-]objects?"<sup>498</sup> The commentary renders this question as a statement, bringing out the logic of the objection: "If my self is [already] blissful, there ought not to be an inward perception of bliss in connection with sense-objects. Therefore, my self does not have the

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<sup>498</sup> VS 4.33, pp. 68-9.

nature of bliss; rather, bliss arises within the self in connection with sense-objects.”<sup>499</sup> We now have two positions: there is the guru’s original teaching, “The self is blissful by nature,” and there is the objection, “The self is not blissful by nature.” These positions are equivalent to the two *koṭis* of Tattvadr̥ṣṭi’s doubt: “Is the self blissful by nature or not?” Tattvadr̥ṣṭi’s trust in the guru as a reliable speaker inclines him to the idea that the self is blissful by nature, but the argument he has just raised inclines him to the opposite position. This epistemic conflict results in a doubtful cognition, i.e. a state of awareness that wavers between the two ideas. In order for the doubt to be removed, the guru must respond to the objection.

The guru begins by providing an alternative picture of where bliss comes from when we perceive pleasant sense-objects. He explains that when the mind is turned away from the self, it begins to desire external objects, and this desire makes the mind restless. Once the object is attained the desire subsides, and the mind is momentarily calmed; in this moment of calm, there appears within the mind, briefly, a reflection or semblance (*ābhāsa*) of the underlying bliss of the self. The guru supports his position further by arguing that bliss cannot really be found in objects. First he points to the case in which one ceases to take pleasure in an object once a desire for some other object arises. This situation makes sense on the guru’s view, since the new desire makes the mind restless and hence occludes the natural bliss of the self, but it does not make sense on the view that objects themselves are pleasurable, since the original object remains unchanged but the person no longer takes pleasure in it. What is interesting is that the guru does not stop with this argument but continues with three more, each introduced by *kiṃvā*, “Or else ... .”<sup>500</sup> These arguments are merely sketched out and could

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<sup>499</sup> VS 4.33 comm., p. 69.

<sup>500</sup> VS 4.36 comm., pp. 69-70.

no doubt be developed further, with additional counter-arguments or replies. But the guru does not appear to be interested in working through the ins and outs of the problem. Instead, the guru seems to be saying: “Take whichever argument you find most helpful”—which makes sense, again, when the concern is not to set forth a fully detailed, perfectly systematic doctrine, but rather to remove a particular doubt on the part of a particular student.

One fruitful approach to understanding the process of inquiry in Nīścaldās’s dialogues is to focus on what I will call the “linking verses”: the short, easily overlooked verses connecting the speeches of the guru with those of the student. On the face of it, these verses are no more than narrative devices for transitioning to a new topic; they seem to have no philosophical significance. Examined closely, however, these verses shed important light on the role of doubt as the driving force behind the dialogue. For example, when the discussion of bliss is brought to a close, the guru addresses Tattvadr̥ṣṭi in this linking verse:

[4.38] Now, tell me if you still have any doubts about this.  
Do not withhold [them]; I will answer them.<sup>501</sup>

If one were focusing on content rather than form, one might well skip this verse. But one would be missing an extremely important point: the guru has just indicated that doubts are not to be suppressed; it is essential for the student to externalize his doubts so that the guru can remove them. The role of doubt is worth reflecting on here, especially in relationship to “faith” (*śraddhā*) and “devotion to the guru” (*guru-bhakti*). In his chapter on *adhikāra*, Nīścaldās explains that faith—defined as “belief (*viśvāsa*) that the statements of one’s guru and the Vedas are true”—is one of the prerequisites for the study of Vedānta<sup>502</sup>; and in his chapter on the teacher-student relationship, Nīścaldās adds that one must be totally devoted to one’s guru,

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<sup>501</sup> VS p. 70.

<sup>502</sup> VS 1.17, p. 5.

loving him as if he were the Lord.<sup>503</sup> But these requirements of faith and devotion do not mean that students are to accept everything the guru says passively, or to conceal doubts about his teaching in order to safeguard their faith. Doubts are to be removed, not concealed, and this requires expressing them to the guru. Faith is a prerequisite of the path, but inquiry itself requires active, critical engagement.<sup>504</sup>

In the course of his dialogue with the guru, Tattvadr̥ṣṭi poses a total of fourteen questions. I will not go into details here about the content of these questions and the answers the guru gives. This content forms the bulk of VS chapter 4, fifty-seven pages of sometimes dense material which is beyond the scope of my study here. What I wish to focus on instead are a few more of the linking verses, which again might be easy enough to pass over as “filler,” but which, when studied closely, provide evidence of the central role of doubt in Nīścaldās’s text. For example, when the guru concludes a discussion of the bliss experienced by the sage, Tattvadr̥ṣṭi says:

[4.43] O lord, you have spoken of supreme bliss, [telling me] to recognize well my own nature. In me there is not a trace of the bondage of the world; this is the teaching you have imparted.

[4.44] A doubt concerning this occurs to me, preventing my heart from accepting what you say. [If] bondage has no place in me, please tell [me]: who is the separate [one] who *does* experience [it]?<sup>505</sup>

Here Tattvadr̥ṣṭi raises one of the most important questions in Advaita Vedānta: if the self is Brahman, who is it that experiences ignorance and suffering? Again, though, I do not plan to

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<sup>503</sup> VS 3.14b-16, pp. 61-2.

<sup>504</sup> These remarks on the relationship of doubt and faith pertain especially to Tattvadr̥ṣṭi, who is especially suited for the practice of inquiry; as we will see in the next case study, Adr̥ṣṭi is encouraged to rely more on faith and to remove his doubts in a different way. Note also that the critical engagement in inquiry is not open-ended; there is nothing of the spirit of *sapere aude* here, since inquiry is directed toward a predefined soteriological end, which is in turn based on a predefined truth; there is no question of correcting or improving on the teaching of the Vedas. Truth is to be discovered for oneself, but this truth is not new, on pain of not being truth.

<sup>505</sup> VS p. 72.



focus on Niścaldās's answer to this question. Instead, note the underlying structure: the guru imparts a teaching, but the student has a doubt, which prevents him from accepting the teaching. "A doubt concerning this occurs to me," Tattvadr̥ṣṭi says, "preventing my heart from accepting what you say." In the more technical language of Niścaldās's epistemology, the *doṣa* of doubt has prevented the arising of *śābda-pramā*.

The guru prefaces his answer with the assurance: "Listen, disciple, to my words, which will remove your doubt."<sup>506</sup> He goes on to assert that the world is utterly unreal, and thus no suffering exists anywhere to be explained. Tattvadr̥ṣṭi, understandably, is still unsatisfied and asks why, if suffering does not exist, it is directly perceived. In the commentary to this verse, Niścaldās makes a familiar move, recasting the question: "Why is suffering directly perceived?" as an objection: "It does not make sense to say that suffering does not exist," and he supports the objection with the argument implicit in Tattvadr̥ṣṭi's question: non-existent objects (like the son of a barren woman) are never perceived, whereas suffering is perceived; therefore suffering is not non-existent.<sup>507</sup> We now have a position (the *pakṣa*, "Suffering does not exist") and a counter-position (the *prati-pakṣa*, "Suffering exists"), which again correspond to the two sides of a doubt. In asking his question, Tattvadr̥ṣṭi is essentially expressing a doubt: "Does suffering exist or not?" Note also that doubt always has a cause. The kind of doubt that troubles Tattvadr̥ṣṭi is not a radical skepticism that doubts everything, but a localized doubt arising from a particular epistemic conflict. Just as in a philosophical debate it is not enough simply to state one's position, but arguments must be given, so too Tattvadr̥ṣṭi's doubt must be based on some particular reasoning or argument. In this case, it is the *yukti* spelled out in the

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<sup>506</sup> VS 4.45, p. 72.

<sup>507</sup> VS 4.46 comm., pp. 72-3.

commentary that underlies Tattvadr̥ṣṭi's doubt. In order to remove the doubt, it suffices to show the flaw in the argument. Once the argument that caused the doubt is recognized as specious (*ku-tarka*), the doubt should go away.

A similar structure underlies the rest of the chapter. Typically there are four steps (though the third, formalizing step is sometimes omitted):

1. The guru imparts a teaching.
2. Troubled by doubt, the disciple poses a question.
3. The commentary formalizes the question as an objection supported by an argument.
4. The guru answers the objection.

The dialectical process can be expanded and complicated with the insertion of additional objections and replies. For example, when Tattvadr̥ṣṭi asks why suffering is perceived if it does not exist, the guru answers with the classic example of a rope mistakenly perceived as a snake. This answer (step 4) leads to a sub-question asking for clarification: "How does a snake appear on a rope?" Tattvadr̥ṣṭi asks. "Please remove this doubt [from] my mind."<sup>508</sup> This leads to a very long discussion of theories of error, with many sub-objections and replies embedded within the discussion. Four theories of error held by non-Vedāntic schools of philosophy are discussed before the fifth, correct theory is introduced.<sup>509</sup> The structure of the discussion is worth noting for its complexity as well as for its ultimately pragmatic goal:

Question: If suffering does not exist, why is it perceived?

Answer: It is an illusion, like a rope mistaken for a snake

Question: How does illusion work?

Four theories of illusion

1. Exposition of theory #1 (*asat-khyāti*)

2. Exposition of theory #2 (*ātma-khyāti*)

Objection to theory #2

Reply to the objection

3. Exposition of theory #3 (*anyathā-khyāti*)

4. Exposition of theory #4 (*a-khyāti*)

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<sup>508</sup> VS 4.48, p. 73.

<sup>509</sup> VS 4.49-50 comm., pp. 73-82.

Refutation of theory #1  
 Refutation of theory #2  
 Refutation of theory #3  
*Prima facie* establishment of theory #4  
 Answer: The fifth, correct theory (*anirvacanīya-khyāti*)  
 Refutation of theory #4  
 Exposition of theory #5  
 An objection  
     Reply to the objection  
 Another objection  
     Reply to the objection  
     Another possible reply  
     Yet another possible reply  
 Restatement of the original position

What I wish to emphasize by means of the outline is the hierarchy of the arguments: within the structure of the dialogue, each argument subserves the ultimate goal of removing the doubt *Tattvadr̥ṣṭi* originally posed. I would argue that for Nīścaldās, inquiry is never undertaken for its own sake; inquiry is always for the sake of removing particular doubts, in order to prepare a student's mind for liberating knowledge. Sometimes doubts can be removed with relative ease, but sometimes there is a complicated nest of doubts underlying the original doubt, and they must be dealt with one by one in turn before the original doubt can be removed. Viewed in this light, the lengthy exploration of theories of error is not the purely scholastic foray it might seem. Indeed, after concluding his discussion of the four incorrect theories Nīścaldās himself pulls back and says: "The explanation and refutation of these four views have been written about at length in works such as the *Vivaraṇa* and the *Svārājya-siddhi*. The arguments (*yukti*) used in explaining and refuting them are difficult (*kaṭhina*); hence the seeker of knowledge has been taught them [here] in a concise form. We have not written about them at length."<sup>510</sup> On my reading, Nīścaldās does not write about these arguments at length

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<sup>510</sup> VS 4.50 comm., p. 76.

because he is not interested in theory for its own sake. His goal is not to construct a system; his goal is pragmatic: to remove whatever particular doubts an inquirer might have.

In my introduction to this dissertation, I quoted a passage as an example of what many readers would find dry, abstract philosophy: “Even though the removal of the snake is possible through an awareness of the rope, nevertheless, the removal of the *awareness* of the snake is not possible, since the substratum of the snake is consciousness delimited by the rope, [while] ... ” and so on. This passage comes from the discussion just outlined above, and we are, hopefully, now in a position to appreciate its soteriological relevance. In his initial teaching, the guru imparts to Tattvadr̥ṣṭi the *mahāvākya*, “You are Brahman.” But the *mahāvākya* is unable to produce saving knowledge in Tattvadr̥ṣṭi, because his mind harbors doubts about the teaching. The guru therefore encourages Tattvadr̥ṣṭi to express these doubts, and through the dialectical process of inquiry, his doubts are removed one by one. The seemingly abstract discussion of substrata, delimitations of consciousness, and the removal of false awareness has the direct and pragmatic goal of removing Tattvadr̥ṣṭi’s doubt as to why he experiences suffering if suffering does not exist.

After the long discussion of theories of error and a further discussion of the falseness of the world, Tattvadr̥ṣṭi explicitly brings the focus of the inquiry back to liberation. He pleads with the guru: “Although the world is false, O venerable guru, still I desire its cessation. ... Therefore tell me, O blessed one, what means [will bring about] the removal of the world?”<sup>511</sup> He also reiterates his faith in his teacher: “There is no other *sadguru* like you,” he says. The guru responds:

[4.60] The means you ask for I have already told you.

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<sup>511</sup> VS 4.58-9, p. 84.

[When] you ascertain it in your heart, not a trace of the world's grief will remain.<sup>512</sup>

Note that the guru does *not* tell Tattvadr̥ṣṭi, “Now that you have received this philosophical teaching, go and practice meditation until you realize it directly.” There is no additional practice at all that he prescribes. Rather, he asserts that the means to liberation is none other than the liberating knowledge he has already communicated through the *mahāvākya*. The problem is that Tattvadr̥ṣṭi has not yet “ascertained” the truth of the *mahāvākya*. Now the word for ascertainment used here is *niścaya*, which is the precise opposite of doubt, *saṃśaya*. The teaching already expressed simply needs to be “ascertained firmly” (*dṛḍha-niścaya*), the commentary explains, and this expression recalls Niścaldās’s gloss of “strong awareness” (*dṛḍha-jñāna*) as doubt-free awareness.<sup>513</sup>

After emphasizing that knowledge alone liberates, the guru says: “O disciple, apply your mind to [this] teaching (*upadesa maim ... hiya dhāri*),” which could be read as a reference to *nididhyāsana* in the general sense of concentration: one’s mind must be must totally focused on the teaching, and an aid to this is repetition of the process of inquiry.<sup>514</sup> The process of inquiry does indeed continue for Tattvadr̥ṣṭi. Throughout the rest of the chapter the guru continues to encourage him to express his doubts. Without going further into the structure of this dialectic, let me simply cite a few more lines from the linking verses, to show once again the prevalence of the theme of inquiry as the removal of doubts:

Guru: “If any doubt still remains, ask, inquiring (*vicāri*) [into it].”<sup>515</sup>

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Tattvadr̥ṣṭi: “A doubt has occurred to me concerning this, suggesting a difference between the soul and Brahman.”<sup>516</sup>

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<sup>512</sup> VS p. 85.

<sup>513</sup> VS 4.60 comm., p. 85.

<sup>514</sup> VS 4.64, p. 86.

<sup>515</sup> VS 4.64, p. 86.

...  
Tattvadr̥ṣṭi: “Please also listen, O guru, to a further doubt which seems to prevent the self and Brahman from being one.”<sup>517</sup>

...  
Guru: “Listen, disciple: I will set forth an inquiry which will ferry you across this doubt.”<sup>518</sup>

...  
Guru: “When you recognize the nature of these [four divisions of consciousness], your doubt will at once be cleared away.”<sup>519</sup>

...  
Tattvadr̥ṣṭi: “Regarding the reflection [of consciousness], a doubt occurs to me. ... Venerable guru, wipe away this doubt! Let me hear your well-reasoned (*yukti-sahita*) words!”<sup>520</sup>

...  
Guru: “Listen now, O disciple, to the discernment of the meaning of the word ‘I,’ which will destroy many a dark doubt within your heart.”<sup>521</sup>

Tattvadr̥ṣṭi’s final doubt is expressed near the end of the chapter, in a verse asking how it is possible to realize Brahman directly when Brahman is beyond the reach of the senses.<sup>522</sup> Recall that Nīścaldās divides doubts into two categories: doubts concerning the means of knowledge and doubts concerning the objects of knowledge. Tattvadr̥ṣṭi’s doubt here concerns the means of knowledge, the *mahāvākya*. The guru, in answering the question, covers some of the same ground I covered in my chapter on epistemology: basically, the answer is that sense-perception is not the only kind of direct perception (*pratyakṣa*). What is striking is that the guru’s last words to Tattvadr̥ṣṭi—the words which, as we will see in a moment, directly precipitate his liberation at the end of the chapter—are surprisingly mundane. The guru simply says, “Do not take [it] as a rule, O disciple, that without sense-organs there can be no direct [perception]. Direct perception is possible without sense-organs, as in the case of the

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<sup>516</sup> VS 4.67, p. 86.

<sup>517</sup> VS 4.70, p. 87. See also the paraphrase in the comm.: “O guru, I have one other doubt ... which thwarts [my] ascertainment (*nīścaya*) of the unity of the *jīva* and Brahman.”

<sup>518</sup> VS 4.72, p. 88.

<sup>519</sup> VS 4.74 comm., p. 88.

<sup>520</sup> VS 4.110, p. 101.

<sup>521</sup> VS 4.111, p. 102.

<sup>522</sup> VS 4.117, p. 115.

awareness of pleasure and pain.”<sup>523</sup> The commentary goes on to explain that the realization of Brahman through understanding the *mahāvākya* is, like the case of the awareness of pleasure and pain, an instance of direct perception without the need for sense-organs.

Had Nīścaldās been aiming for dramatic effect in the writing of his dialogues, one might criticize the denouement: there is nothing esoteric or profound about the guru’s final teaching. He does not whisper any secret words or provide some hidden key. His last words to Tattvadr̥ṣṭi are matter-of-fact, even banal: “Direct perception is possible without sense-organs, as in the case of the awareness of pleasure and pain.” But the guru’s words do all they need to do: they remove Tattvadr̥ṣṭi’s last remaining doubt. His final teaching is the culmination of a process that began with Tattvadr̥ṣṭi’s first question and continued throughout the chapter. It matters little that Tattvadr̥ṣṭi’s final doubt was relatively insignificant compared to his earlier doubts; it was enough to prevent the arising of knowledge (*pramā*). Once that doubt is removed, there is no longer anything standing between Tattvadr̥ṣṭi and liberating knowledge. The chapter concludes with a verse declaring his liberation: “Having heard this teaching from the guru, the intelligent Tattvadr̥ṣṭi, understanding his self to be Brahman, put an end to the error of difference.”<sup>524</sup>

Later, in VS chapter 7, we receive confirmation of Tattvadr̥ṣṭi’s liberation. This chapter—a sort of “where are they now?” epilogue—tells us what happened to the three brothers after they left the guru. Tattvadr̥ṣṭi’s liberation, which is used as an occasion for discussing the state of liberation-in-life, is directly connected with his having been delivered from doubts: “The highest [level of disciple, i.e. Tattvadr̥ṣṭi] understood himself to be

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<sup>523</sup> VS 4.118, pp. 117-8.

<sup>524</sup> VS 4.119, p. 120.

Brahman,” Nīścaldās writes. “There remained [in him] not a trace of doubt.”<sup>525</sup> We are then told that Tattvadr̥ṣṭi wanders about with no fixed rule for his behavior, praised by some and reviled by others who fail to understand his lofty state. “Never was there error or doubt [in him],” Nīścaldās says. “He ascertained the truth. ... The non-dual light of Brahman arose from the *pramāṇa* of the Veda.”<sup>526</sup> Here we have confirmation that it was not the guru’s final teaching as such that liberated Tattvadr̥ṣṭi, but rather the *pramāṇa* of the Vedic utterance “You are Brahman,” which became fully operative only when the guru had removed his student’s doubts. Liberated in life, Tattvadr̥ṣṭi has nothing left to accomplish. He wanders about until his remaining *karma* is exhausted and then sheds his body, never to be reborn again.<sup>527</sup>

#### *The Case of Adr̥ṣṭi*

The tale of Tattvadr̥ṣṭi, the eldest brother, has a happy ending. But what of his brothers, the princes Adr̥ṣṭi and Tarkadr̥ṣṭi? Nīścaldās is by no means the first Vedāntin to use the dialogue form, but again, to my knowledge he is the only author to use a dialogue in which more than one student is seated at the feet of the teacher. Although the dialogue in chapter 4 takes place between the guru and Tattvadr̥ṣṭi, his brothers are also there listening, as Nīścaldās himself reminds us at the end of all three dialogues: “Highest, middle, and lowest: [all] three heard this teaching of the guru.”<sup>528</sup> If Adr̥ṣṭi and Tarkadr̥ṣṭi heard the same teaching as Tattvadr̥ṣṭi, why were they not liberated too? The answer, I believe, is that they were still troubled by doubts. As we shall see, the dialogue continues with the middle and youngest brothers each posing

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<sup>525</sup> VS 7.1b, p. 284.

<sup>526</sup> VS 7.7b-8, pp. 284-5.

<sup>527</sup> VS 7.17, pp. 298-9.

<sup>528</sup> VS 7.1a, p. 284.



questions of their own to the guru. With each new dialogue, the pragmatic, pedagogical nature of inquiry is evident, as the guru adapts his approach to the needs of each student. The three brothers have different doubts and aptitudes, and they must therefore be taught in different ways.

Adṛṣṭi's name means "not-seeing," and he is clearly the least clever of the three brothers. The guru begins by taking him through the process of inquiry, though even from the beginning his approach is somewhat different from the approach he took with Tattvadrṣṭi. Adṛṣṭi first asks how it is possible for the Vedas and the guru, which ultimately speaking are not real, to lead a disciple to liberation.<sup>529</sup> The question is not particularly insightful, since its answer was already implied in the long discussion the guru had with Tattvadrṣṭi about the rope and the snake. More importantly, though, Adṛṣṭi does not pose his question simply as a doubt about a particular aspect of the guru's teaching; his doubt pushes him to call into question the entire system of Advaita Vedānta. We also learn that this doubt has been suggested by teachings Adṛṣṭi has heard elsewhere. After posing his question, Adṛṣṭi says: "Thus one sees [that] the school of Śaṅkara is incorrect; it should be given up entirely, [as] Madhva and others have made known."<sup>530</sup> Note the difference between this sweeping doubt and the more particular doubts Tattvadrṣṭi had raised. Adṛṣṭi is raising both a particular doubt—"Is knowledge possible if the Vedas and guru are not real, or not?"—as well as a much more serious general doubt: "Is Advaita Vedānta true or not?" Adṛṣṭi himself realizes the

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<sup>529</sup> VS 5.1, p. 121.

<sup>530</sup> VS 5.2b, p. 121.

gravity of his doubt, for after raising it he says: “This doubt arises in me, O blessed one. Please give [me] an answer, O compassionate one, and do not be angry [with me].”<sup>531</sup>

The guru responds with an argument from authority, to which he had never appealed when teaching Tattvadr̥ṣṭi. The guru assures Adr̥ṣṭi that the sage Vyāsa himself, in the Purāṇas, declares Śaṅkara to be an incarnation of Śiva. He also mentions Vālmīki, the (attributed) author of the *Yoga-vāsiṣṭha*, which upholds Advaitic teachings. On the authority of Vyāsa and Vālmīki, the guru says, we know that Śaṅkara’s interpretation of the Vedas is authentic. “Others who expound the meanings of the Vedas,” he concludes, “are all deceivers, laboring in vain.”<sup>532</sup>

In addition to this appeal to authority, the guru tells Adr̥ṣṭi that there are arguments (*yukti*) refuting the teachings of those who do not accept non-duality. He mentions Śrīharṣa’s *Khaṇḍana-khaṇḍa-khāḍya* in particular. The guru does not go into these arguments, however, but simply points to their existence:

[5.13b] [These works] are extremely difficult, [their] arguments hard to follow. Your mind will not [be able to] enter into them, O disciple.

[5.14] Hence I have not spoken to you of their statements, which refute difference (*bheda*) with arguments.  
When the schools of the dualists are understood to be unauthoritative, there is no need for refutation through arguments.<sup>533</sup>

The guru implies that he himself is capable of explaining the arguments, but that they would be beyond Adr̥ṣṭi’s grasp. Moreover, he says that there is no need to enter into debate with dualist thinkers, once it is understood that they are not authorities. The guru concludes by quoting two short passages from the Upanishads, giving both the Sanskrit original and a Hindi

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<sup>531</sup> VS 5.3a, p. 121.

<sup>532</sup> VS 5.8, p. 122.

<sup>533</sup> VS p. 123.

translation. As I mentioned in chapter 3, this is the only occasion in the whole of *The Ocean of Inquiry* when Nīscaldās quotes directly from the Vedas in Sanskrit. This deliberate choice appears to have been intended, in context, to bolster the appeal to authority: the Vedas themselves refute the views of the dualists.

Adṛṣṭi had initially stated a particular doubt based on a particular argument, but then went on to express a more general doubt, not based on any particular argument but on a lack of faith in the teachings of Advaita Vedānta. This lack of faith, it seems, was incited through the relatively external cause of having heard about contrary interpretations of the Vedas by other schools of Vedānta. The guru recognizes the problem and responds accordingly. He does not try to use philosophical arguments, since that is not the level at which the doubt arose. Instead, he shores up Adṛṣṭi's faith through appeals to authority. He concludes by urging Adṛṣṭi to "forget therefore the words of Madhva and others which you have heard."<sup>534</sup> Here we see a major difference between Tattvadrṣṭi and Adṛṣṭi, which will continue to manifest throughout the chapter: while Tattvadrṣṭi's path is intellectual, Adṛṣṭi's involves more effort of will; the guru does not provide him with arguments to dispel doubts about dualism, but instead encourages him to turn his mind away from them. Tattvadrṣṭi is encouraged to express his doubts, while Adṛṣṭi is encouraged to forget them.

The guru next uses a long narrative in order to reinforce the lesson about the danger of listening to other schools of Vedānta. This use of narrative provides another example of the guru adapting his teaching style to the student: with Tattvadrṣṭi he used only arguments and short illustrations, but with Adṛṣṭi he launches into an extended parable to impress the lesson more vividly on his disciple's mind. The variety of literary devices Nīscaldās employs in this

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<sup>534</sup> VS 5.17, p. 123.

section would be worth a thorough study in its own right, but this is beyond the scope of what I can accomplish here; instead, let me just mention a few points briefly. First, the narrative is entirely in verse, with no prose commentary. It is by far the longest extended passage of verse in the entire text, running for 129 verses, or 14 pages in the printed edition, with no intervening commentary.<sup>535</sup> Nīścaldās's prose is as a rule more densely argumentative than his poetry, and it seems that he believed verse instruction to be better suited to the capacities of a disciple such as Adṛṣṭi. Second, the narrative is uninterrupted by questions or objections on the part of Adṛṣṭi, making it far more sermon-like than any of the guru's exchanges with Tattvadrṣṭi. Third, the narrative is centered around a parable: a loyal minister named Bharchu is exiled through the machinations of evil ministers, who go on to convince the king that Bharchu is dead. Because the king listens to their lies, he is unable to recognize Bharchu even when he sees him in a forest—just as seekers of liberation who listen to the *bheda-vādins* will be unable to recognize their identity with Brahman even when they hear a *mahāvākya*. Finally, the narrative includes an extended meditation on the vanity of worldly pleasures, voiced by a disenchanted Bharchu. The minister-turned-renunciate begins by reflecting on the charms that poets attribute to women; this reflection is followed by a deconstruction of the selfsame poetic conventions, as the various body parts the poets praise are shown to be “impure and unlovely.”<sup>536</sup> “What beauty is there in [women]?” Bharchu concludes. “They are temples of aversion and disgust.”<sup>537</sup> There follows a description of the miseries of married life—whether one's wife is beautiful or ugly, Bharchu reflects, either way she will make you miserable!<sup>538</sup>

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<sup>535</sup> VS 5.18-146, pp. 123-137.

<sup>536</sup> VS 5.36, p. 126.

<sup>537</sup> VS 5.36, p. 126.

<sup>538</sup> VS 5.52-89, pp. 128-132.

Why is this long meditation included? The implication seems to be that Adṛṣṭi himself is not yet perfectly detached—which would support Pītāmbar’s notion (discussed in the previous chapter) that not all qualified students come to the study of Vedānta possessing the four prerequisites in equal measure.

The narrative of Bharchu is followed by another, shorter parable about a king who suffers in a dream but is cured by a doctor in the dream.<sup>539</sup> The guru first uses this parable to answer Adṛṣṭi’s initial, particular doubt about how the Vedas and one’s guru are able to bring about liberation even though they are not ultimately real. Only after this long teaching through poetry and parable does the guru finally return to a more philosophical approach, introducing the Vedāntic distinction between levels of reality.<sup>540</sup> Here we are back to the process of inquiry, and one gets the sense that had Tattvadrṣṭi posed the same question, the guru would have gone straight to this distinction without first teaching with parables.

The process of dialectic does not go very far before Adṛṣṭi strays from it with a *non sequitur*. The guru has just delivered a somewhat abstract teaching—“When X arises through ignorance of Y, the sublation of X takes place through the knowledge of Y”—when Adṛṣṭi changes the subject to cosmology, asking about the order in which the elements of cyclic existence came into being.<sup>541</sup> Whereas Tattvadrṣṭi’s questions had all expressed doubts directly related to the guru’s teaching, Adṛṣṭi’s question seems almost to be posed out of curiosity. In his answer, the guru suggests that the question is not a helpful one to raise in the first place, since cyclic existence is not real; the point of the descriptions of cosmology in the Upanishads, he says, is ultimately to negate the existence of the world. The guru does go on to discuss

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<sup>539</sup> VS 5.125-146, pp. 135-7.

<sup>540</sup> VS 5.147ff., p. 138ff.

<sup>541</sup> VS 5.150b, p. 142; VS 5.151, p. 142.

cosmology,<sup>542</sup> but he connects the discussion with fundamental Vedāntic teachings about the nature and locus of ignorance and the sheaths that envelop the self. The guru's teaching is followed by a remarkable comment:

Thus did the guru impart the teaching of the hidden essence to his disciple. Even so, seeing that the disciple's face did not light up with joy, he realized: "[My] disciple has not [yet] reached the goal. Had he done so, his face would have lit up with joy." For this reason, he next spoke of meditative dissolution (*laya-cintana*), in order to present the teaching in a simpler form (*sthūla-rīti saim*).<sup>543</sup>

The guru does not have to wait for Aḍṛṣṭi to pose any new question; he can tell from his face that he has not yet achieved liberation.<sup>544</sup> Here again we see the importance of having a teacher who is able to recognize and respond to the needs of the student. A book alone is not enough, since it cannot adapt its teachings to each reader. It cannot look a student in the eye and gauge where the student stands and what to say next. While *The Ocean of Inquiry* is more "teacher-like" than most books in that it includes separate chapters for different levels of aspirants, even its threefold scheme will not account for the complexity of all possible levels and needs; hence Nīścaldās's insistence on the need for studying the book with a teacher.

Recognizing that his initial approach is not working with Aḍṛṣṭi, the guru changes tack, deciding to present his teaching "in a simpler form." This phrase *sthūla-rīti saim*—literally, "in a gross manner"—and equivalent phrases are used often by Nīścaldās, again suggesting that he does not understand Vedānta as a fixed system of doctrine, but as a flexible teaching which can be expressed in different ways according to different levels of analysis. On several occasions in *The Ocean of Inquiry*, Nīścaldās sketches two versions of the same position, or even

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<sup>542</sup> For details on this cosmology, see my discussion of material epistemology in chapter 4 above.

<sup>543</sup> VS 5.166 comm., p. 166.

<sup>544</sup> The teacher's recognition in this passage is reminiscent of the Zen practice of *dokusan*, in which students meet one-on-one with their teacher to discuss their progress in meditation. During these sessions, the teacher is supposed to assess students' level of understanding not just based on their words, but also on the way they speak and carry themselves.

provide two different answers to the same question.<sup>545</sup> Usually he begins with the simpler explanation but later goes on to say: “If one considers [the matter] more subtly (*sūkṣma-rīti saim*)” or (more commonly) “If one inquires [into the matter] (*vicār karike*).” This pattern is characteristic of Nīścaldās’s accessible style and pedagogical concern: he begins with a simplified account and then, once the basics are grasped, proceeds to complicate it.

With Adṛṣṭi, we see that the needs of pedagogy can take us in the other direction, too. The guru realizes that Adṛṣṭi is not capable of following the relatively subtle path of inquiry he has been leading him along, so he decides to take a simplified approach. Indeed, he goes on to prescribe an altogether different path for Adṛṣṭi than the path of intellectual inquiry followed by Tattvadrṣṭi and Tarkadrṣṭi. Adṛṣṭi alone is given a path of meditation—the “meditative dissolution” (*laya-cintana*) referred to in the passage quoted above. Here it is worth noting the titles of each of the three dialogues in *The Ocean of Inquiry*.<sup>546</sup> The chapter containing the dialogue with Tattvadrṣṭi is called “A Description of the Teaching Given to the Highest Level of Student.” The chapter on Tarkadrṣṭi is descriptive of the discussion on which it is centered: “A Description of the Unreality of Means Such as the Vedas and the Guru.” Only the chapter on Adṛṣṭi has a twofold title: “A Description of the Conventional Reality of the Vedas, the Guru, etc.; [and] a Description of the Means for the Middle Level of Student.” Tattvadrṣṭi and Tarkadrṣṭi follow the path of inquiry, and the titles of their dialogues point to the content of their exchanges with the guru. Adṛṣṭi, too, begins with the path of inquiry—hence the first title describing the content of his discussion with the guru. But the guru eventually sees that he is

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<sup>545</sup> For examples of Nīścaldās answering the same question in different ways, see Bhuvaneshwari 2010, pp. 11-2.

<sup>546</sup> These titles are included in the colophon to each chapter in the manuscript versions, and as both colophon and chapter-heading in some printed editions.

not meant for this path, and prescribes for him instead a different “means” (*sādhana*), hence the second title.

The alternative path the guru prescribes for Adṛṣṭi is a form of meditation on Brahman without form (*nirguṇa-brahma-upāsanā*) involving a mental dissolution of the cosmos into Brahman (*laya-cintana*) and identification of oneself with Brahman; the guru also describes a related practice in which the various levels of the cosmos are resolved into the component syllables of “OM,” and one meditates on one’s identity with OM. Both forms of practice are known as “meditation grasping the ‘I’” (*ahaṃ-graha-dhyāna*). The details of these practices need not concern us here; the main point to note is that this path of meditation is distinct from the path of inquiry. Nīścaldās explains:

He to whom, despite having inquired into the Great Statements, direct knowledge does not arise, on account of some obstacle (*pratibandhaka*) such as dull-mindedness, for him this meditation in the form of a reflection on [cosmic] dissolution (*laya-cintana*) is recommended.<sup>547</sup>

Nīścaldās goes on to distinguish sharply between meditation (*dhyāna*) and knowledge (*jñāna*); I have discussed the position he sets forth here in my last chapter. What is worth emphasizing is that the idea of qualification has been significantly complicated by the introduction of a separate path of meditation. We know that Adṛṣṭi is an *adhikārin*, i.e., he is qualified to study Vedānta.<sup>548</sup> Up to this point, I have been treating the path to liberation as synonymous with the path of inquiry. But with Adṛṣṭi we see that there are in fact two paths to liberation: for those who are intellectually up to it, there is the path of inquiry, while for those who are prevented by “some obstacle such as dull-mindedness,” there is the path of meditation. Adṛṣṭi’s relative

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<sup>547</sup> VS 5.167 comm., p. 168.

<sup>548</sup> There is, admittedly, the possibility that he does not possess the four prerequisites of *adhikāra* in all their fullness. Again, the long section on renunciation, discussed above, suggests that Adṛṣṭi might well lack perfect detachment; and if we follow Pītāmbār’s suggestion that meditation is necessary only for those whose minds are still unsteady, it would seem that Adṛṣṭi lacks concentration as well. Nonetheless, he is clearly identified as an *adhikārin*, albeit a middling (*madhyama*) one.



lack of intelligence, which becomes obvious in the course of his dialogue with the guru, is already signified by his name: Adṛṣṭi is “the non-seeing one,” or more loosely “he who doesn’t get it.” His lack of intelligence does not at all disqualify him from pursuing liberation; “intelligence” and “cleverness” are notably absent from the list of prerequisites for the study of Vedānta. It does prevent him from being classified as an *adhikārin* of the highest rank, however, and it prevents him from pursuing the path of inquiry, since the latter is an intellectual path.

The distinction between the path of inquiry and the path of meditation is also found in Nīścaldās’s other major work, the *Vṛtti-prabhākar*. Nīścaldās explains:

There are two means (*sādhana*) to liberating knowledge (*tattva-jñāna*): for the highest level of student (*uttama-adhikārī*), the means is hearing etc. (*śravaṇādi*), while for mid-level students (*madhyama-adhikārī*), the means to liberating knowledge is “I”-grasping meditation on the formless Brahman (*nirguṇa-brahma kā ahaṃ-graha upāsanā*).<sup>549</sup>

This description corresponds precisely with the paths followed respectively by Tattvadrṣṭi, who is identified as the highest level of *adhikārin*, and Adṛṣṭi, who is a mid-level *adhikārin*. It follows that the path of liberation as outlined in my last chapter—the path consisting of hearing, reflection, and contemplation—does not in fact apply to all levels of *adhikārins*. Nonetheless, there is good reason to treat that path as prototypical, since Nīścaldās himself treats it as such. Before delving into cosmology in the chapter on Adṛṣṭi, Nīścaldās makes it clear that this material is intended only for those who have been unable to reach liberating knowledge through the path of inquiry. He further remarks: “The present work is for the sake of the highest level of seekers (*uttama-jijñāsu*), hence the origination of the world . . . will [only]

<sup>549</sup> VP 7.122, p. 417. —Curiously, Nīścaldās does not mention the lowest level of student in this passage, nor anywhere else in the VP as far as I know. It would be worth comparing the views in the VS and the VP with Nīścaldās’s views in the *Yukti-prakāś*; but this task lies outside the scope of the present dissertation.

be set forth in brief.”<sup>550</sup> In other words, *The Ocean of Inquiry* is primarily intended, as the title suggests, as a guide to the process of inquiry, with students like Tattvadr̥ṣṭi representing the ideal audience. Nonetheless, Nīścaldās wishes to provide guidance to all levels of seekers; hence, he provides also a description of cosmology and meditational instructions based thereon, albeit concisely. At the end of the chapter, he even includes a verse providing brief guidance for those who are not even qualified for the practice of meditation on formless Brahman:

[5.169] He who cannot [undertake] this meditation on the unqualified  
Should cause his mind to abide in the Lord with qualities.  
He who cannot [undertake] this meditation on the qualified  
Should perform *karmas* without desire, worshipping Rām with devotion.  
He who cannot [undertake] *karmas* without desire  
Should perform auspicious *karmas* with desire.  
[As for] the one who cannot [undertake] *karmas* with desire,  
[Such a] wicked one, dying, will be born again and again.<sup>551</sup>

Here we see that Nīścaldās’s pedagogical concern extends even to those who are not, strictly speaking, qualified for the study of Vedānta. As discussed in the last chapter, those who are properly qualified should already have performed *karmas* and *upāsanās*, so as to purify and stabilize their minds. In this passage Nīścaldās nonetheless provides guidance to those who have not yet reached this level of qualification. Indeed, he goes so far as to provide more detailed instructions for lower-level aspirants—who do not qualify for the threefold path of hearing, reflection, and contemplation (and who are therefore outside the scope of my study here)—in his final chapter, in which King Śubhasantati, the father of the three brothers, receives instructions on which form of deity to worship.<sup>552</sup>

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<sup>550</sup> VS 5.153 comm., p. 143.

<sup>551</sup> VS pp. 182-3.

<sup>552</sup> VS 7.27-100 (with comm.), pp. 310-323.

How should we understand the differences between Adṛṣṭi and his older brother? Tattvadrṣṭi, we know, is one who “sees” or “gets it,” while Adṛṣṭi is one who does not. Tattvadrṣṭi possesses a keen mind, while Adṛṣṭi is “dull-minded.” Tattvadrṣṭi follows Nīścaldās’s preferred path of intellectual inquiry, while Adṛṣṭi follows a path of meditation instead. Finally, Tattvadrṣṭi achieves liberation in life, while Adṛṣṭi, as we shall see, does not. One might be tempted to conclude that the difference between students lies mainly in their intelligence: an intelligent student will be able to follow the path of inquiry and thereby to grasp the truth directly, while a less intelligent student will need to follow the less direct path of meditation. While there is some truth to this, there is also a complication: as we shall see, the third and youngest brother, Tarkadrṣṭi, is also intelligent, and like Tattvadrṣṭi, he also pursues a path of inquiry rather than meditation; nonetheless, he is ranked even lower than Adṛṣṭi.

I will return to this puzzle shortly. For now, let us hear the conclusion of Adṛṣṭi’s tale. The meditational instructions the guru delivers are relatively long, but they are uninterrupted by questions or doubts on the part of Adṛṣṭi. The lack of back-and-forth between the guru and his disciple is another sign that Adṛṣṭi is no longer engaged in inquiry, but is pursuing a different path. We learn of his fate in VS chapter 7, after the description of Tattvadrṣṭi’s liberation in life:

[7.18] The second disciple, Adṛṣṭi, [went] to an auspicious site on the banks of the Ganges,  
[And in] a solitary place of exceeding purity he meditated on Brahman.

[7.19] He relinquished his body in accordance with the *śāstras*, and by the path previously described  
He went, and having attained to Brahman he achieved great joy.<sup>553</sup>

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<sup>553</sup> VS pp. 299–300.

The “path previously described” refers to the “path of the gods” (*deva-mārga*), along which one who has spent his life meditating on Brahman ascends progressively after his death until reaching the world of Brahmā. As Nīścaldās explains, in the world of Brahmā, the element of *sattva*—which, recall, is associated with the arising of knowledge—predominates, and therefore knowledge arises with ease. After enjoying the delights of the world of Brahmā, one’s remaining *karma* is exhausted and, remembering the teaching “I am Brahman” on which one had meditated during one’s life, liberating knowledge arises.<sup>554</sup> Note how even though the path of meditation in practice is quite different from the path of inquiry, the final steps are the same: once all obstacles in the mind are removed, the verbal testimony of the *mahāvākya* produces knowledge, which yields liberation. So Adṛṣṭi’s story also has happy—and epistemologically consistent—ending.

#### *The puzzle of Tarkadṛṣṭi*

What of the third brother, Tarkadṛṣṭi? His case presents a peculiar puzzle for two reasons: first, not only is Tarkadṛṣṭi more intelligent than Adṛṣṭi, he is also able to follow the higher path of inquiry rather than meditation; second, he ends up achieving liberation in this very life rather than having to ascend to the world of Brahmā after death. Tarkadṛṣṭi thus follows a higher path and achieves a higher (or at least more immediate) form of liberation. In spite of this, however, Tarkadṛṣṭi is ranked as a *kaniṣṭha-adhikārin*, i.e. the lowest level of qualified student, while Adṛṣṭi is said to represent the *madhyama*, or mid-level student. The puzzle becomes even more perplexing when one notes that only Tarkadṛṣṭi receives the teaching of *dṛṣṭi-sṛṣṭi-vāda*, or pure idealism, which Nīścaldās repeatedly identifies as the highest teaching

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<sup>554</sup> VS 5.168 comm., p. 180.

in Vedānta. Why does Tarkadr̥ṣṭi, the lowest level of aspirant, receive the highest level of teaching, a teaching that even Tattvadr̥ṣṭi does not receive?

I believe the key to solving the puzzle lies in a theme I have been arguing for throughout: the central role of inquiry, understood as an intellectual process aimed at the removal of doubts. With Adr̥ṣṭi, we saw that not all students are up to the intellectual rigors of inquiry: “dull-minded” students are recommended a path of meditation instead. With Tarkadr̥ṣṭi, we see that even for students who are intelligent enough to pursue the path of inquiry, there is still a distinction to be made between those whose doubts are relatively few, and those who are consistently troubled by doubts. In the opening verse of VS chapter 6, Nīścaldās tells us that Tarkadr̥ṣṭi is “intelligent” (*matimān*), but in the commentary he goes on to explain that intelligence is not enough: “One who is filled with many doubts, even if his mind is sharp (*tīvra*), is nonetheless a student of the lowest rank.”<sup>555</sup> On my interpretation, Tarkadr̥ṣṭi’s “sharp mind” sets him apart from the “dull-minded” Adr̥ṣṭi and qualifies him for the path of inquiry. He differs from Tattvadr̥ṣṭi, however, in that his mind is “filled with many doubts.” Tattvadr̥ṣṭi also had doubts, of course; as we saw above, his dialogue with the guru consisted of him posing a series of questions expressing various doubts. The problem with Tarkadr̥ṣṭi, then, is not that he has doubts; the problem is the multitude of his doubts.

Why is Tarkadr̥ṣṭi more doubtful than his brothers? This question is open to interpretation, but one possibility is that he represents a skeptical type, someone who is always ready to raise an objection regardless of what the particular position is. Although Nīścaldās himself does not distinguish between different kinds of doubt, one might suggest a distinction between a “bounded” or localized doubt arising from particular instances of

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<sup>555</sup> VS 6A.1 comm., p. 184.

epistemic conflict and an “unbounded” or generalized doubt arising from an inclination not to accept anything before analyzing it exhaustively. On this interpretation, Tarkadṛṣṭi is by nature “argumentative,” as his name suggests: literally, he is “one who sees [only] arguments.” Another possible interpretation is that Tarkadṛṣṭi, though perhaps not a skeptic, is too fond of the argumentative process itself. On this interpretation, he suffers from a kind of intellectual myopia: Tarkadṛṣṭi cannot see beyond the arguments themselves, whereas Tattvadṛṣṭi’s intelligence makes use of arguments but does not become attached to them. While Tarkadṛṣṭi easily gets lost in the “horizontal” exploration of this or that piece of reasoning (*tarka*), Tattvadṛṣṭi’s intelligence is relatively “vertical,” making use of arguments instrumentally to ascend to knowledge of the truth (*tattva*).

There are two words that Nīścaldās uses to refer to “reasoning” or “arguments” in *The Ocean of Inquiry*. The first is *yukti*, which always has a positive connotation; it is *yukti*, or proper reasoning, that removes doubts. By contrast, *tarka* tends to have a negative connotation; the word usually appears in the context of *ku-tarka*, or faulty reasoning. *Tarka* as such is not a bad thing—as a technical term, it simply refers to suppositional reasoning or *reductio*-type arguments, which Nīścaldās himself uses throughout the text.<sup>556</sup> Nonetheless, the term suffers by association: when Indian philosophers wish to criticize the limits of a purely logical approach, *tarka* is usually the term of choice.<sup>557</sup>

Nīścaldās continues his description of the lowest level of student by prescribing *yukti* as a remedy for *ku-tarka*:

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<sup>556</sup> In the *Vṛtti-prabhākar* (2.8, p. 43), Nīścaldās defines *tarka* as “the pointing out of an undesired [conclusion]” (*aniṣṭ-āpādan-kūṃ tark kahaiṃ hai*), i.e. the pointing out of an unacceptable conclusion that would follow were a given position to be accepted.

<sup>557</sup> On the “ambivalent estimation of *tarka*” (p. 21) in Indian philosophy, see Kang 2010; see also Halbfass 1988, pp. 279-282. On *yukti*, *tarka*, and related terms, see Halbfass 1991, pp. 134-5.

This chapter consists primarily of arguments (*yukti-pradhān*) and will therefore be useful for one who, having heard the teachings already given, has fallen into faulty reasoning (*ku-tarka*). A *kaniṣṭha-adhikārin* is one whose mind has been disturbed (*dūṣita*, lit. ‘spoiled’ or ‘corrupted’) by faulty reasoning.<sup>558</sup>

We thus have two indications of what makes a student like Tarkadṛṣṭi a *kaniṣṭha-adhikārin*: first, his mind is “filled with doubts”; second, his mind has been “disturbed” by *ku-tarka*. The two indications are closely linked: the word for “disturbed” (*dūṣita*) is simply the past participle of *duṣ*, which is the root of the word “fault” (*doṣa*), and we know that for Nīścaldās, doubt is a fault that prevents the arising of knowledge. A mind that has been “disturbed” by *ku-tarka* is thus a mind that has been led to the fault of doubt.

Nīścaldās does not propose that students like Tarkadṛṣṭi should ignore their doubts or abandon the path of inquiry. Instead, they need to have their doubts removed, just like the highest level of students, through the use of *yukti*. Like is cured by like: doubts arising from faulty reasoning are removed through the proper use of reason under the guidance of a guru. Recall that for Nīścaldās, it is not enough for a teacher to be liberated; the teacher must also be well versed in “the arguments (*yukti*) necessary to clear away the doubts of the one seeking knowledge.”<sup>559</sup> In the case of the highest level of students, relatively few arguments will be needed, while in the case of the lowest level of students, whose minds are filled with doubts, more arguments will be needed.

The classification of students in *The Ocean of Inquiry* thus seems to be based on two factors: (a) intellectual aptitude and (b) the tendency to doubt. The first distinction to be drawn, based on intellectual aptitude, is between students who are capable of following the path of inquiry and students who are not. Nīścaldās regards the path of inquiry as the ideal path, but he allows for the possibility of “dull-minded” students, who are better suited to a

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<sup>558</sup> VS 6A.1 comm., p. 184.

<sup>559</sup> VS 3.4 comm., p. 57.

path of meditation. This factor accounts for the distinction between Tattvadr̥ṣṭi and Adr̥ṣṭi. Among students who follow the path of inquiry, there is a further distinction to be drawn, based on their tendency to doubt. Students with relatively few doubts and the ability to grasp the truth (*tattva*) quickly are classified as students of the highest level, while students with many doubts and a tendency to get tangled up in arguments (*tarka*) are classified as students of the lowest level. This factor accounts for the distinction between Tattvadr̥ṣṭi and Tarkadr̥ṣṭi.

Whichever factor one focuses on, it is clear that Tattvadr̥ṣṭi represents the highest level of student, though the question still remains: why is Tarkadr̥ṣṭi ranked last, in spite of following a higher path than Adr̥ṣṭi and achieving a more immediate form of liberation? I will return to this question at the end of this section, after we have learned more of Tarkadr̥ṣṭi's story. For now, it is worth stressing again the central role of doubt as an obstacle to liberation. Tattvadr̥ṣṭi raises doubts, but his doubts are removed relatively quickly. Adr̥ṣṭi, for his part, seems to be relatively untroubled by doubts: he asks only three or four questions in the course of his entire dialogue with his guru, and once the guru assures him with an argument from authority, he seems content; his faith is strong, and although he is not inclined by nature to the path of intellectual inquiry, neither is he inclined to an endless stream of doubts. Tarkadr̥ṣṭi by contrast is keenly intelligent and is drawn toward intellectual inquiry, but the process of removing doubts is not as effective with him as it is with Tattvadr̥ṣṭi, because his doubts keep arising. The more doubts one has, the more work there is to be done on the path to inquiry. And if the stream of doubts never comes to an end, knowledge will never be able to arise.

Let us turn now to the dialogue between Tarkadr̥ṣṭi and the guru. The dialogue begins with Tarkadr̥ṣṭi turning over in his mind the guru's teaching that the world is unreal like a



dream, which he had heard while the guru was instructing Adṛṣṭi. Niścaldās specifically tells us that Tarkadrṣṭi waits until his brothers are finished before posing his own questions: “Having heard [the previous] discussion and having observed that both of his brothers had ceased from questions, Tarkadrṣṭi posed a question [of his own].”<sup>560</sup> This small but significant detail in the narrative helps to reinforce the point that different students will have different doubts, and that the guru’s teaching must be tailored accordingly. Tarkadrṣṭi has heard the same teaching that Tattvadrṣṭi and Adṛṣṭi received, but while his brothers are satisfied and ask no more questions, Tarkadrṣṭi is still troubled by doubts.

Tarkadrṣṭi’s “question” is really an objection: dreams, he argues, are always based on the memory of something real—namely, something from waking life—so one cannot use the example of a dream to establish the unreality of the world, as the guru did in his dialogue with Adṛṣṭi.<sup>561</sup> It makes sense that Niścaldās would refer to this objection as a question, however, since as I have argued, questions can always be reformulated to express an underlying doubt. In this case, Tarkadrṣṭi’s doubt can be expressed as the question “Is the world false like a dream, or is it not?” The guru’s teaching represents the first side, while Tarkadrṣṭi’s argument supports the other side. Tarkadrṣṭi also gives a second argument: perhaps dreams are not false at all, but are the experiences of the subtle body travelling elsewhere while the gross body sleeps.<sup>562</sup>

The guru responds to these two arguments at length, and as usual I will not be focusing on the details of his response but on the underlying structure of the chapter. In the course of a long prose commentary, a new objection is raised, against the guru’s assertion that dream-

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<sup>560</sup> VS 6A.1 comm., p. 184.

<sup>561</sup> VS 6A.2, p. 184.

<sup>562</sup> VS 6A.3, p. 185.

objects originate at the same time as our awareness of them. It is worth noting that the following objection is philosophically more sophisticated than any of the questions raised by Adṛṣṭi, and arguably more so than any raised even by Tattvadrṣṭi. The objector (whom we may take as Tarkadrṣṭi) says:

If one accepts the arising of objects in a dream, then, just as according to you the objects of the waking state are shown to be false through the example of dreams, likewise the objects in a dream, on account of their arising, ought to be true, like objects in the waking state. This problem can be avoided, however, if one does not accept the arising of objects in a dream. How so? The objects of the waking state appear once they have arisen, whereas objects in a dream appear without having ever come into being. Hence the awareness of objects in a dream as having come into being is erroneous. It is not reasonable to suppose that they ever originated.<sup>563</sup>

The sophistication lies in the use of a formal inference (*anumāna*)—dream objects (the *pakṣa*) are real (the *sādhya*), because they came into being (the *hetu*), like objects of the waking state (the *dṛṣṭānta*)—which cleverly inverts the guru’s use of the dream example and which is in turn used as part of a larger *reductio ad absurdum*.

The discussion continues back and forth with an inquiry into the nature of dreams and waking, in the course of which many additional doubts are raised and resolved. At one point the commentary discusses an argument from Madhusūdana Sarasvatī’s *Advaita-siddhi*, a relatively challenging work of dialectics to which, presumably, the guru would not have referred when dealing with Adṛṣṭi.<sup>564</sup> The discussion of dreams and waking finally leads to the guru explaining the doctrine of pure idealism, or *dṛṣṭi-sṛṣṭi-vāda*, according to which “both the objects of the waking state and our awareness of them arise together and are destroyed together.”<sup>565</sup> In other words, external objects do not exist independently of our cognitions of

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<sup>563</sup> VS 6A.6 comm., pp. 189-190.

<sup>564</sup> VS 6A.9 comm., p. 195.

<sup>565</sup> VS 6A.9 comm., p. 199.

them, or as Nīścaldās puts it, “Objects exist only when they are perceived.”<sup>566</sup> Nīścaldās identifies this doctrine as the *uttama-siddhānta*, or highest position, of Vedānta<sup>567</sup>; he also calls it “the hidden position of the Veda” (*ved kā gūḍh-siddhānt*).<sup>568</sup>

Why does Tarkadr̥ṣṭi, who represents the lowest rank of qualified student, receive the highest level of teaching? One might be tempted to associate the *content* of the different teachings with the different students to whom they are addressed. On this view, one would expect Tattvadr̥ṣṭi to receive the highest level of teachings, Adr̥ṣṭi to receive a slightly lower level, and Tarkadr̥ṣṭi to receive the lowest level of teachings. But this is clearly not the principle of organization behind Nīścaldās’s text. Nīścaldās has avoided too facile a hierarchy: it is not that each ascending grade of disciple receives progressively loftier, truer, or more esoteric teachings. In fact, all three disciples receive exactly the same fundamental teaching, viz. the identity of the self with Brahman. All of the guru’s teachings are just various ways (*prakriyā*) or means (*upāya*) of removing particular doubts and thereby helping students realize the truth of this teaching. I would argue that Nīścaldās is not so much concerned with the doctrinal niceties of Advaita Vedānta as he is with the concrete goal of liberation. On my reading, there is no particular reason that Tarkadr̥ṣṭi receives the *dr̥ṣṭi-sṛṣṭi* teachings rather than Tattvadr̥ṣṭi. The eldest brother could just as well have received these teachings, but since the topic of dreams did not come up, the guru had no occasion to introduce the doctrine. The puzzle of Tarkadr̥ṣṭi thus serves Nīścaldās well: had Tattvadr̥ṣṭi been the one to receive the *dr̥ṣṭi-sṛṣṭi* teachings, it would have been all too easy to assume that what matters pedagogically is doctrinal content, rather than the process of responding to particular doubts as they arise.

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<sup>566</sup> VS 6A.9 comm., p. 201.

<sup>567</sup> VS 6A.7 comm., p. 193.

<sup>568</sup> VS 6A.9 comm., p. 199.

Tarkadr̥ṣṭi proves unable, in any case, to rise to the level of the *dr̥ṣṭi-sṛṣṭi* teachings. He objects that if the guru's position is correct, that would mean no one has ever been liberated.<sup>569</sup> The guru responds that Tarkadr̥ṣṭi is indeed correct: "To this day, no one has become liberated, and no one ever will," since pure consciousness simply is what it is, eternally free of the play of bondage and liberation.<sup>570</sup> Nevertheless, the commentary points out, Tarkadr̥ṣṭi's question "was posed from a gross (*sthūla*) perspective, without understanding the position."<sup>571</sup> Tarkadr̥ṣṭi's point is essentially correct, but the guru recognizes that he is asking it out of confusion rather than out of insight. Assessing the perspective from which questions are posed allows the guru to tailor his responses accordingly.

From the pattern of teaching that emerges through exchanges such as this, we can infer an additional step in the process of inquiry, one in which the guru assesses the needs of the disciple. First, the guru delivers a teaching. Second, the disciple raises a doubt, expressed as either a question or an objection. Third, the guru answers; but here is where an additional step intervenes: just as the second step could be sub-divided into an inward and then an outward step (the inward doubt and its outward expression as a question or objection), the third step can be divided into the guru's inward assessment of the disciple's level, based on the kind of question or objection raised, followed by his outward response to the disciple. What this implies is that there need not be a single, set response to questions and objections. The guru must draw from his experience as a teacher and his assessment of the needs of the particular student. We saw this process illustrated earlier with Adṛṣṭi, when the guru eventually abandoned the process of inquiry altogether. There the inward step on the part of

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<sup>569</sup> VS 6A.10-11, p. 202.

<sup>570</sup> VS 6A.11 comm., p. 203.

<sup>571</sup> VS 6A.11 comm., p. 203.

the guru was stated explicitly in the text, which records the guru's thought: "My disciple's face has not lit up, so he must not yet have come to realize the truth of the teaching."<sup>572</sup> We see a similar process at this point in the dialogue with Tarkadṛṣṭi: the guru knows from his question that he has not yet understood the doctrine of *dṛṣṭi-sṛṣṭi*, and the guru must now choose how to respond.

With Aḍṛṣṭi, the guru chose to respond to his disciple's gross level of understanding with an answer at that level. With Tarkadṛṣṭi, however, the guru chooses to try to bring the disciple up to a higher level of understanding, teaching him by means of a striking meta-narrative.<sup>573</sup> In the spirit of the *Yoga-vāsiṣṭha*, which contains many dream narratives, the guru weaves for Tarkadṛṣṭi a long story about a god named Agr̥dha, who once dreamed he was an outcaste wandering in a forest full of suffering. In his dream, he finds a guru who promises to show him the way out of the forest. This dream-guru instructs Agr̥dha from a book, which Niścaldās proceeds to give in full. The dream-book that the dream-guru uses was, we are told, originally composed in "the language of the gods," but has been translated into the vernacular.<sup>574</sup> (Pītāmbar, in his gloss on this line, feels obliged to assure the reader that this is merely a conceit, and that there is no original Sanskrit work.<sup>575</sup>) Not only has this dream-book been rendered in the vernacular, it begins, just like *The Ocean of Inquiry*, with five benedictory verses. It even concludes with a benedictory verse to Dādū, which would of course not be found in a Sanskrit work in any case. The meta-point is clear: the dream-book from which the dream-guru instructs Agr̥dha is just like *The Ocean of Inquiry*, which, from the perspective of

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<sup>572</sup> Cf. VS 5.166 comm., p. 166.

<sup>573</sup> VS 6A.12-6B.59, pp. 203-283.

<sup>574</sup> VS 6A.12 comm., p. 206.

<sup>575</sup> Gloss 379, VS p. 206.

*dr̥ṣṭi-sṛṣṭi*, *vāda*, is just as unreal as a book in a dream. Yet this unreal book has the power to liberate.

One way of interpreting the doctrine of *dr̥ṣṭi-sṛṣṭi* is that it represents a “sudden teaching” meant to jolt the student out of his everyday vision of the world. Other doctrines of the *jīva*, such as *avaccheda-vāda* and *pratibimba-vāda*, which were discussed in my chapter on epistemology, run the risk of allowing one to place too much emphasis on conventional truth and a coherent account of conventional realities. In the discussion of these doctrines, we saw how easily, for example, elements of realist epistemology were incorporated into Nīścaldās’s preferred doctrine of *ābhāsa-vāda*. The doctrine of *dr̥ṣṭi-sṛṣṭi*, by contrast, effectively does away with conventional reality, insisting that the only reality with any kind of logical consistency is the pure consciousness of the self. Everything else only *appears* to present a coherent reality, just as cause and effect may appear in dreams, though in fact they are an illusion.<sup>576</sup> In dreams, *pramāṇas* appear to work, but on waking we know that this was an illusion, because the objects of knowledge did not exist prior to their being perceived; according to *dr̥ṣṭi-sṛṣṭi*, it is the same with everyday acts of knowledge. One could thus interpret the guru’s use of *dr̥ṣṭi-sṛṣṭi* teaching as an *upāya* intended to break Tarkadṛṣṭi out of his attachment to *tarka*. After all, dream-realities are hardly a proper object for logical analysis.

Nīścaldās’s book-within-a-book narrative is thus intended, I would argue, as a technique for helping Tarkadṛṣṭi (and the reader) to break free of their everyday dream-like perceptions. Once the book-within-a-book begins, the main character, Agr̥dha, is not mentioned by name again until the end of the dream-narrative, some 50 pages later. The

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<sup>576</sup> Nīścaldās offers the intriguing example of a son whose mother appears in a dream. Within the dream, it would seem that the dream-mother is the cause of the dream-son, but this is really an illusion, since a real cause would exist prior to its effect, whereas the dream-mother did not exist prior to her dream-son; rather, both are simultaneously created by the dreaming mind. (VS 6A.7 comm., p. 190)

intervening material contains the same kind of inquiry into Vedāntic teaching now familiar to the reader, and I believe Nīścaldās has intentionally made it so that it is easy to forget that one is really within a “sub-creation.” When Agr̥dha is suddenly reintroduced at the end of the narrative, his liberation follows just two or three verses later, and the hope is no doubt that the reader, too, will awake from his own reading of the text and reflect on the illusoriness of everything around him—including *The Ocean of Inquiry* itself.

It is worth pausing for a moment on the liberation of Agr̥dha, since his story provides us an additional “case study” in liberation. We are never told what level of qualification Agr̥dha possesses, but since he achieves liberation in this life through the process of inquiry, he must presumably correspond to either the highest or lowest level of student. He achieves liberation relatively quickly, and along similar lines as Tattvadr̥ṣṭi, which would suggest that he belongs to the level of an *uttama-adhikārin*. If so, this would provide further support for my argument that Nīścaldās has not divided the highest from the lowest levels of qualified student on the basis of the *content* of teachings they receive, since this chapter is after all intended to illustrate the method for instructing students of Tarkadr̥ṣṭi’s level.

The book-within-a-book begins with a verse in which a student poses three questions to a guru: (1) Who am I? (2) Where does the world come from? (3) What is the means to liberation?<sup>577</sup> As I argued above, whenever a student poses a question in the course of inquiry, the question can always be reworded in order to formalize a two-pronged doubt: “Is it the case that *p*, or is it the case that not-*p*?” Sure enough, this is exactly what Nīścaldās does in the commentary to this verse: the student poses the same three questions, but they are translated

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<sup>577</sup> VS 6B.8, p. 210. —Cf. *Aparokṣānubhūti* v. 12: *ko ‘haṃ katham idaṃ jātaṃ ko vai kartā ‘sya vidyate / upādānaṃ kim astīha vicāraḥ so ‘yam īdr̥śaḥ //* “Who am I? How is this [world] created? Who is its creator? What is the material cause [of this world]? This is the way of vicāra.” (Trans. slightly modified from Vimuktananda, pp. 7-8)

into a series of specific, formalized doubts. For example, the first question (“Who am I?”) is formalized as a series of doubts: (a) “Am I my body or not?” (b) “If different from the body, then am I an agent and experiencer or not?” and (c) “If I am beyond action, is the self the same in all bodies, or are there many selves?” This series of doubts, we are told, is the intention (*abhiprāya*) behind the first question.<sup>578</sup> The other two questions are likewise translated into a series of two-pronged doubts. Then, in the dialogue that follows, the guru leads the student systematically through each doubt, answering his questions and responding to his objections. The answer to the first question emerges in the course of an extensive and detailed discussion examining and rejecting the views of self put forth by other schools of Indian philosophy. The second question is answered through an inquiry into the role of the Lord (*īśvara*) as creator of the world. Finally, the third question is answered as the guru recapitulates teachings already familiar to readers of the dialogues with *Tattvadrṣṭi* and *Adṛṣṭi*. Knowledge alone, we are reminded, is the sole direct means to liberation. This point leads to a discussion of the *mahāvākyas* and a long discussion of philosophy of language explaining how exactly sentences such as “You are Brahman” work. At the end of the book-within-a-book, we are told that the student “at once found happiness,” and the reader is given the assurance that “whoever inquires well into this [work], for him the snare of the world will [also] be destroyed.”<sup>579</sup>

At the end of the chapter, we suddenly remember *Agr̥dha*, who has been dreaming the whole time. It was in a dream that he encountered a dream-guru, who taught him using the book-within-a-book discussed above.<sup>580</sup> The book-within-a-book comes to a close, but we are

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<sup>578</sup> VS 6B.8 comm., p. 210.

<sup>579</sup> VS 6B.51, p. 282.

<sup>580</sup> The literary conceit in this chapter reads almost like a Borges story: a student in a book receives teaching from a guru who is also a character in the book, which is being read aloud by a guru in a dream, who is a character in a story being told by a guru who is in turn a character in a narrative composed by *Nīścaldās*!



told that Agr̥dha is not yet liberated. He asks the guru whether there is something else he still needs to do, some additional practice he needs to undertake.<sup>581</sup> The dream-guru assures him that there is not:

[6B.55] The destruction of the forest will come about, O disciple, from what you have [already] heard. Aside from this, there is no other means. ...

[6B.56] Inquire into the meaning of the *mahāvākya*. Call out: “I am Agr̥dha.” Having heard and inquired into this saying, the pupil called out “I am Agr̥dha.”

[6B.57] His sleep was no more, light returned to his eyes. The forest, the guru, the book—all were ended. Filled with happiness, he forgot the sufferings of the forest. He who was Agr̥dha truly attained his proper form.<sup>582</sup>

This passage offers evidence for an interpretation of *nididhyāsana* I proposed in the last chapter: *nididhyāsana* not as a formal practice of meditation but rather as a repetition or rehearsing of teachings already received, as one recites or turns the *mahāvākya* over in one’s mind. Agr̥dha does not undertake any particular yogic practice. The guru has already explained that liberation comes about solely by means of the *mahāvākya*. Aside from “what you have [already] heard,” i.e. aside from the *mahāvākya* received through *śravaṇa*, there is no other means. With a teacher’s guidance, a student inquires into the meaning of the *mahāvākya*, working through his doubts one by one. This process is carried on again and again until all doubts are removed and erroneous inclinations no longer remain. The pupil then recalls the *mahāvākya* once again,<sup>583</sup> and this time, his doubts destroyed, it leads him to liberation.

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<sup>581</sup> VS 6B.54, p. 282. —Agr̥dha’s question parallels a question posed by Tattvadr̥ṣṭi in VS 4.58-9 (p. 84): “Although the world is false, O lord among teachers, I still want it to end. . . . Tell me, O blessed one, what means [will bring about] the cessation of the world?” The guru replies that he has already told Tattvadr̥ṣṭi the means, viz. *jñāna*. All that remains is for him to make the awareness “firm” (*dr̥ḍha*), i.e. (on my interpretation) to rid himself of doubts (VS 4.60 comm., p. 85).

<sup>582</sup> VS pp. 282-3.

<sup>583</sup> This passage thus also supports my interpretation of the problem of memory discussed near the end of the last chapter.

As remarkable as the book-within-a-book and dream narrative are, they are not enough to convince the ever dubious Tarkadr̥ṣṭi. After the conclusion of the story of Adr̥ṣṭi, Tarkadr̥ṣṭi's dialogue with the guru concludes, but it does not end with his liberation. Indeed, Tarkadr̥ṣṭi is the only one of the three brothers who leaves his guru unsatisfied. Tattvadr̥ṣṭi wins liberation at the end of his dialogue with the guru, while Adr̥ṣṭi goes off to practice meditation faithfully according to the guru's instruction. Tarkadr̥ṣṭi, we learn in the final chapter of *The Ocean of Inquiry*, goes off to pursue further studies: "Then Tarkadr̥ṣṭi, the third, having received teaching from his guru's mouth / Immersed himself thoroughly in the eighteen *prasthānas*."<sup>584</sup> The commentary explains that Tarkadr̥ṣṭi felt doubtful because of the apparent contradiction of Vedānta with other *śāstras*. It is perhaps worth noting that in real life it would take a very, very long time to penetrate the meaning of all eighteen. For example, the *purāṇas* in all their bulk constitute just one of the eighteen *prasthānas*! Tarkadr̥ṣṭi's studies bear fruit, however: he concludes that there is no real contradiction among the various *śāstras*, since all of them ultimately point in the direction of Advaita Vedānta.<sup>585</sup>

Even this long period of study does not suffice to remove Tarkadr̥ṣṭi's doubt, however. After all, he came to this conclusion on his own, and could he not be mistaken? The commentary explains:

[Tarkadr̥ṣṭi] inquired into the intention of all the *śāstras*, for the sake of [achieving] steadiness (*sthiratā*) of mind with respect to the truth (*artha*) he had heard from his guru. Nevertheless, doubt arose again: "Is the intention of the *śāstras* indeed as I have ascertained it, or is their intention something else?" Why did this doubt arise? Tarkadr̥ṣṭi is said to be a qualified student of the lowest rank. Hence, doubt arises again and again through specious reasoning (*kutarka*).<sup>586</sup>

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<sup>584</sup> VS 7.20, p. 300. —Note that the discussion of the eighteen *prasthānas* and their relationship to Advaita Vedānta closely follows Madhusūdana Sarasvatī's *Prasthāna-bheda*, so much so that this part of the VS can be viewed as an adapted (and unattributed) translation of Madhusūdana's text into Hindi.

<sup>585</sup> VS 7.21 and comm., p. 300-308.

<sup>586</sup> VS 7.22 comm., p. 308.

The use of the word *sthira*tā, “steadiness,” is intriguing here, calling to mind the fault of “instability” (*cañcalatā*) or mental “scattering” (*vikṣepa*), which is in turn associated with the activity of *rajas*. One might speculate that the difference between Tattvadr̥ṣṭi and Tarkadr̥ṣṭi is that of a mind in which *sattva* predominates versus a mind in which *rajas* has more power. Whatever the underlying cause, Tarkadr̥ṣṭi’s problem is clearly his recurring doubt.

Tarkadr̥ṣṭi does eventually find liberation, though his quest is a circuitous one. We have already seen how he left the guru unsatisfied, plunging into a long study of other *śāstras*. Even after concluding that there is no contradiction between these *śāstras* and the guru’s teaching, Tarkadr̥ṣṭi is still in doubt. He therefore goes to another teacher and explains his tentative conclusion about the unity of the various *śāstras*. His exchange with this second teacher is surprisingly brief; the teacher simply confirms that Tarkadr̥ṣṭi’s insight is correct: “What you have told me is indeed the foremost doctrine.”<sup>587</sup> Simple as it is, this confirmation is enough to remove the last trace of Tarkadr̥ṣṭi’s doubt. And that, in turn, is enough to win him liberation in life:

[7.24] As all his doubts were destroyed, he then realized Brahman directly.  
He knew the world and everything in it to be unreal, and likewise bondage and liberation.<sup>588</sup>

Reflecting on the full story of Tarkadr̥ṣṭi’s quest for liberation, I believe we are now in a position to solve the final part of the puzzle: why does Tarkadr̥ṣṭi, the lowest ranking disciple, attain the highest possible goal—liberation in life—while his brother Adr̥ṣṭi does not, despite his higher level of qualification? Nīścaldās gives no direct answer to this puzzle, but I would suggest the following solution: Tarkadr̥ṣṭi’s path was not only a long one, it was also a dangerous one. At any stage of the process, his doubting nature could have led him to abandon

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<sup>587</sup> VS 7.23, p. 308.

<sup>588</sup> VS p. 309.

the path of inquiry. The period when he engaged in a study of other systems of philosophy would have presented special dangers: we are told that Tarkadr̥ṣṭi had a weakness for specious reasoning, and it would have been quite easy for him to have been seduced by the arguments of other schools and to fall away from Vedānta. Nīścaldās himself, later in the chapter, specifically warns that although it is true, as Tarkadr̥ṣṭi realized, that non-Vedāntic *śāstras* ultimately point to the truth of Vedānta, nonetheless, only Vedānta should be studied, and other *śāstras* should be ignored, since if they are followed they will easily lead to ruin.<sup>589</sup>

Tarkadr̥ṣṭi manages to navigate these perils successfully, but even so his doubt is not dispelled until he finds another teacher to confirm his insight. Here, too, we see the danger of Tarkadr̥ṣṭi's path. We know from the chapter describing the characteristics of a true teacher that a guru is not easy to find. When it is already difficult enough—and presumably requires a good store of previous merits—to find even one reliable guide, how easy will it be to find a second teacher as well? My reading is that we should not view liberation-in-life as inevitable for the lowest rank of disciple. Tarkadr̥ṣṭi happens to succeed, but surely not everyone in his position will be so lucky. Or rather, instead of speaking of “luck,” we should say that not every disciple will have such good *karma*; Nīścaldās specifically tells us that Tarkadr̥ṣṭi was able to realize the import of all *śāstras* because of his *uttama-saṃskāras*. Even if one did manage to find a second teacher, there is no guarantee that one's doubts would then be resolved as they were for Tarkadr̥ṣṭi. After all, the second teacher could be doubted, too, and so on indefinitely. In short, I would suggest that there was no guarantee of liberation-in-life for Tarkadr̥ṣṭi. Tattvadr̥ṣṭi's liberation, as his name suggests, was far more certain, and although Adr̥ṣṭi does not achieve liberation-in-life, he was nonetheless placed on a safe path with the guarantee of

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<sup>589</sup> VS 7.103-104 comm., pp. 323-325.

eventual liberation. Tarkadṛṣṭi's fate, by contrast, seems to have hung in the balance. Nīścaldās gives us a happy ending, but one could easily imagine a different version, in which Tarkadṛṣṭi is seduced by the dark side of *bheda-vāda*.

A final point worth noting is that only Tarkadṛṣṭi engages seriously with non-Vedāntic teachings. Tattvadṛṣṭi seems to have been uninterested in the topic, while Adṛṣṭi is specifically warned by the guru to ignore the teachings of other schools. Once again the lesson seems to be that different students have different needs: the highest level of student will show little interest in the teachings of other schools; the middle level of student will need to be steered away from these teachings altogether; the lowest level of student will have to be led, cautiously, through a maze of various views. Interestingly, Nīścaldās's own intellectual career seems to have mirrored Tarkadṛṣṭi's to some extent. He tells us in the closing verses of *The Ocean of Inquiry* that he "labored in Sāṃkhya and Nyāya ... and with effort plunged into difficult compositions in which the differences between various schools are set forth."<sup>590</sup> It is perhaps significant, too, that while Tattvadṛṣṭi, after achieving liberation in life, wanders about until his death, it is Tarkadṛṣṭi who, in accordance with his *prārabdha-karma*, goes on to become a guru himself.<sup>591</sup> Tarkadṛṣṭi specifically warns his father, Śubhasantati, against the study of non-Vedāntic *śāstras*, "to which those of lesser qualification (*manda adhikārī*) are attached."<sup>592</sup> Although Tarkadṛṣṭi emerged unscathed from his own study of other systems, he realizes the danger of such study for others. Here, too, there is perhaps a reflection of Nīścaldās's own mission: to use his own thorough knowledge of Vedānta and other systems to spare others the

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<sup>590</sup> VS 7.111-112, p. 327.

<sup>591</sup> VS 7.106 and comm., p. 325.

<sup>592</sup> VS 7.104, p. 323-4.

labor and danger of having to navigate, on their own, an “ocean” of seemingly contradictory teachings.

### *Conclusions*

In this chapter we have seen what inquiry looks like in practice for Niścaldās, and how the process works to remove doubts. I have argued that the method of inquiry is fundamentally the same as the method used throughout Indian philosophy, namely, the process of establishing a position through a dialectical exchange between a *pūrva-pakṣin* and a *siddhāntin*. We see the process of inquiry illustrated in the debate form of Niścaldās’s philosophical prose, and we see it even more clearly and paradigmatically in the dialogues between the guru and the three brothers. These dialogues, I suggest, can be viewed as idealized “transcripts” of sessions of inquiry, rather as Plato’s dialogues provide transcripts of Socratic dialectic. The process of inquiry is thus enacted in the very text of *The Ocean of Inquiry*.

The dialogue form typically begins with a statement of the *siddhānta* by the guru, followed by a question or objection by the student and then the guru’s response. As I have shown, the student’s question or objection corresponds to the raising of a doubt, while the guru’s response corresponds to its resolution. I have also shown that this basic form can be complicated by objections-within-objections, creating a nested, hierarchical structure in which, in order to resolve the original doubt, additional points must be considered. Even when the arguments become complicated, however, Niścaldās never loses sight of the pragmatic orientation of the dialogue: the purpose of each exchange is to remove a particular doubt standing between the disciple and liberation.

This chapter has also offered some important refinements to Niścaldās’s view of the path to liberation as outlined in the previous chapter. First, we have seen that for Niścaldās,

inquiry must always be undertaken with the guidance of a teacher. “Even a person who is proficient in all the *śāstras*,” Nīścaldās writes, “will not attain to knowledge without receiving instruction from a guru.”<sup>593</sup> Second, we have seen that since different students have different needs, the teacher must employ different techniques in guiding them through the process of inquiry. Third, we have seen that not all students will in fact be capable of inquiry. As was the case with Adṛṣṭi, the teacher should be prepared to recommend alternative methods to those whose minds are not up to the rigors of inquiry. All three of these points help to highlight the essentially pedagogical focus of *The Ocean of Inquiry*—a focus in keeping with Nīścaldās’s own career as a teacher. Nīścaldās manages to achieve a blend of intellectualism and pragmatism, wherein even seemingly abstruse, “scholastic” discussion have a place, so long as they conduce to the concrete goal of liberation.

Finally, I have suggested a solution to the “puzzle of Tarkadrṣṭi” and the closely related question of Nīścaldās’s classification of levels of *adhikāra*. On my analysis, the three brothers represent three types: a person of “vertical,” penetrating intelligence (Tattvadrṣṭi); a person lacking in intelligence (Adṛṣṭi); and a person of “horizontal” intelligence (Tarkadrṣṭi), who is skilled at reasoning but who is always filled with new doubts. What is remarkable about Nīścaldās’s system of classification is that Tarkadrṣṭi is placed below Adṛṣṭi. Given Nīścaldās’s intellectualist leanings and his emphasis on the process of inquiry, one might have thought that Adṛṣṭi, the only disciple who could not follow the process, would represent the lowest level. One would then have a natural progression from Tattvadrṣṭi, who pursues inquiry and succeeds quickly, to Tarkadrṣṭi, who pursues inquiry and eventually succeeds though it takes him longer, to Adṛṣṭi, who ultimately proves incapable of pursuing inquiry and must meditate

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<sup>593</sup> VS 3.7 comm., p. 58.

instead. By reversing the ranking of Adṛṣṭi and Tarkadrṣṭi, Niścaldās seems to suggest that intelligence is a double-edged sword. Possessing a keen mind is no guarantee of liberation, and for students such as Tarkadrṣṭi, the mind can even be an obstacle. An intelligent mind, when properly guided by inquiry and a guru, can lead to liberation in life; but the mind can also be an obstacle, since it is the seat of doubts. Tarkadrṣṭi does ultimately win liberation, and in fact goes on to become a guru himself. But Niścaldās implies that the path followed by such a student is a dangerous one. By contrast, Adṛṣṭi's lack of intelligence is arguably even something of a boon, since once he receives the guru's instructions he is able to put them into practice diligently without being troubled by doubts.

Niścaldās's classification is valuable for the light it sheds on his view of the role of technical "philosophy," in which arguments are investigated in patient and painstaking detail. Is such intellectual activity necessary for liberation? Niścaldās's answer would be a nuanced "yes and no." It all depends on who you are. The highest level of aspirant will probably not need this kind of philosophy, and the middle level will not be able to follow it in any case. But it does fulfill an important function for the lowest level of aspirant, who by nature is disposed to such debates, and who needs to work through them in order to resolve his doubts and thereby attain liberation.



## CONCLUSION

*Summary of the argument – Philosophy and religious practice – Intellectual values in late Advaita Vedānta – Directions for further research*

Advaitins sometimes distinguish between two kinds of thoughts: thoughts focusing on the self are said to be “inwardly oriented” (*antar-mukha-vṛtti*), while thoughts focusing on external objects are “outwardly oriented” (*bahir-mukha-vṛtti*). A similar distinction might usefully be applied to textual studies: an inwardly-oriented study proceeds by way of close reading and interpretation, attempting to understand the literary or philosophical world “within” the text; an outwardly-oriented study looks to the significance of the text and its ideas in the larger world without. While my study of inquiry in the last three chapters has been inwardly oriented, here in my conclusion I would like to turn my attention outward, looking at the broader implications of the argument I have been trying to make about the meaning and role of inquiry in Nīścaldās’s work. I will begin by offering a brief summary of that argument, before looking at ways this argument can shed light on two broader issues: (1) the relationship of philosophy to religious practice and (2) the intellectual values of late Advaita Vedānta. I will conclude with a discussion of directions for future research.

### *Summary of the argument*

Advaita Vedānta is well known for teaching that knowledge is the means to liberation, but what does “knowledge” mean? Is it the kind of knowledge that can be had through, say, studying a work such as *The Ocean of Inquiry*? Or is there a distinction to be drawn between theoretical knowledge (“book-learning”) and liberative knowledge? I have argued that for Nīścaldās, liberative knowledge exists on a continuum with everyday knowledge. It is not the pure, eternal, non-dual consciousness of Brahman (*svarūpa-jñāna*) that liberates, since

everyone has that within them already; what liberates is a particular instance of awareness within the mind (*vr̥tti-jñāna*), which removes the veil of ignorance and allows the pure consciousness of Brahman to shine forth. Like any other kind of knowledge, this liberative knowledge must be produced by a valid means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*). In this case the means is verbal testimony: hearing the words “You are Brahman” (or an equivalent *mahāvākya*) is what gives rise to liberative knowledge.

The perhaps surprising implication is that liberative knowledge is a verbal, conceptual knowledge. For Nīścaldās, the kind of knowledge that liberates is precisely the kind of knowledge one gets through studying a work like *The Ocean of Inquiry*. As he himself writes: “The present work is a means to liberation, through the knowledge it produces.”<sup>594</sup> Nowhere is there a distinction between liberative knowledge and mere “book-learning.” Nor is there a distinction between liberative knowledge and a purely “theoretical” or “academic” knowledge. Instead, the key distinction is between doubtful and doubt-free awareness. Nīścaldās would say that what appears to be a purely theoretical or academic knowledge of one’s identity with Brahman is not really knowledge, which is by definition a state of doubt-free awareness. Insofar as the awareness “I am Brahman” comes up against other sources of awareness (such as one’s awareness of being an individual, of having a body, or of experiencing suffering), one is in fact in a state of epistemic conflict, the result of which is not knowledge but doubt: “Am I Brahman, or am I not?” What is needed, therefore, is a process for removing doubts. What is needed is inquiry.

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<sup>594</sup> VS 2.11 comm., p. 36.

I began this study by asking three questions: what is inquiry? Why is it so important for Niścaldās? And what does it look like in practice? In brief, I have argued for an interpretation of *The Ocean of Inquiry* that answers these questions as follows:

- Inquiry (*vicāra*) is a dialectical process of raising and resolving doubts.
- It is the central practice on the path to liberation.
- This practice is enacted in the text itself, both in its dialogues and in its philosophical method more generally.

The method of inquiry is fundamentally the same as the dialectical method employed throughout Indian philosophy: one establishes one's own position by considering and responding to arguments from the other side. In the case of inquiry, the position (*siddhānta*) is the teaching "You are Brahman," while the arguments from the "other side" are expressions of a student's doubts. Only by expressing these doubts and having them answered does the student reach a state of certainty (*nirṇaya*, *niścaya*).

In order for inquiry to be effective, however, one must already have fulfilled certain preliminary steps: either in this life or in a past life, one must have performed practices of purification and meditation, in order to render the mind pure and steady. I argued that although these preliminary requirements might seem arbitrary if viewed solely from the perspective of "instrumental epistemology," they make excellent sense in light of Niścaldās's "material epistemology." For Niścaldās, the mind is by nature *sāttvika*, meaning it is capable of reflecting the light of pure consciousness and hence giving rise to knowledge. Like a mirror, the mind will not be able to function properly unless it is polished and held steady. Practices of purification (such as Vedic sacrifices, penances, recitation of God's name, etc.) polish the mind by subduing the influence of *tamas*; practices of meditation steady the mind by subduing the

influence of *rajas*. Once a mind has been restored to its proper, *sāttvika* nature, it is qualified for the practice of inquiry. In epistemological terms, the knower (*pramātṛ*) must be free from faults (*doṣa*) that might otherwise block the functioning of the means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*).

Inquiry is a pragmatic, even “therapeutic” practice: it does not aim at the discovery of truth but at the removal of doubts. Since different students come to the process with different doubts, inquiry must be tailored to each student, as we see in the dialogues with the three brothers. The eldest brother, Tattvadr̥ṣṭi, represents Nīścaldās’s ideal student: he is intelligent and able to attain liberation in a relatively short period of time. The middle brother, Adṛṣṭi, represents a student who is relatively untroubled by doubts, but who turns out to lack the intellectual aptitude necessary for the process of inquiry. This kind of student is prescribed a path of meditation instead. The youngest brother, Tarkadr̥ṣṭi, represents an intelligent but overly argumentative student whose mind is consistently troubled by doubts. I have argued that by ranking Tarkadr̥ṣṭi as the lowest level of student, Nīścaldās suggests that intelligence can be a double-edged sword: for students like Tattvadr̥ṣṭi, who grasp the truth easily, intelligence is an unquestionable good; for students like Tarkadr̥ṣṭi, their fondness for argument can potentially lead them astray.

For Nīścaldās, the practice of inquiry is not an end in itself; it is instrumental to the goal of liberation. He is willing to explore philosophical questions at great length and in great detail if they help to remove a student’s doubt, but he is not interested in system-building for its own sake. The guru does not aim to be an original thinker, though the particular questions a student raises might well require flexibility and creativity to answer. The guru likewise does not aim to display skill as a dialectician, though he will probably do so incidentally. In every case, the guru is first and foremost a teacher, responding to the particular questions his

students raise and helping them to resolve their doubts. Nīścaldās's guiding principle is pedagogical. "The correct approach for a seeker of knowledge," he writes "is to follow whichever approach gives rise to realization."<sup>595</sup> For some (like Tattvadr̥ṣṭi) this will require a brief period of inquiry, while for others (like Tarkadr̥ṣṭi) the process will take much longer. Nīścaldās is even willing to grant the possibility of not pursuing inquiry at all (as in the case of Adr̥ṣṭi)—it all depends on the needs and aptitude of the student. For every student, the final goal is the same: liberation.

### *Philosophy and religious practice*

With this summary of the argument behind us, let us now turn to the relationship of philosophy and religious practice. In keeping with the move from "inwardly oriented" to "outwardly oriented" reflections, I would like to take an "inside-out" approach: that is to say, I am not interested in how the categories of "philosophy" and "religion" might help us better understand Nīścaldās's text; instead, I am interested in how Nīścaldās's text might help us better understand the categories of "philosophy" and "religion," allowing for new understandings of the relationship of philosophy and religious practice. Here I align myself with scholars such as José Cabezón and others who have argued that the traditions we study are not only worth thinking *about*, but also thinking *with*.<sup>596</sup>

As we have seen, Nīścaldās requires students of Vedānta to have already performed two kinds of practices: practices of purification and practices of meditation. For the sake of

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<sup>595</sup> VS 6B.42 comm., p. 275.

<sup>596</sup> Cabezón (2006) offers several examples of scholars who "have begun to look at religion not just as the data—not simply the raw material to be *manipulated* by theory—but as the *source* of theory. ... Faure (2004) puts it more simply and elegantly when he says of Buddhism (the focus of his study) that it is not only something 'we can think *of*, but also think *with*' (pp. 30-1).

argument, let us provisionally refer to these as “religious” practices.<sup>597</sup> Certainly they are not the kind of practices usually discussed in philosophy departments: practices of purification include ritual practices (such as Vedic sacrifices), recitation of sacred formulas (such as the repetition of the name of the Lord), penances (such as bathing in the Ganges), and devoted service to a guru, while practices of meditation in this context refer specifically to meditating on the forms of particular deities, or (more ideally for Nīścaldās) on the Lord beyond forms.

Once a student has completed these preliminary practices and thereby achieved a pure and steady mind, the student is qualified for inquiry, which can be thought of as a “philosophical” practice.<sup>598</sup> I have already shown that the method of inquiry is fundamentally the same method used by all Indian philosophers. The connection between inquiry and philosophy is further established by Nīścaldās’s own definition of inquiry as proceeding by means of *yukti*, or reasoning.<sup>599</sup> At the very least, we can say that inquiry represents an intellectual practice—a practice of “thinking,” as the word *vicāra* itself suggests—that involves working through arguments for and against a position.

How does philosophy relate to religious practice? I would like to suggest two possible answers to this question, both of which call into question any rigid disciplinary distinction

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<sup>597</sup> Note that Nīścaldās’s vocabulary and conceptual framework is consistent with earlier, classical Sanskrit traditions, in which there is of course no exact equivalent for “religion” (see, e.g., Smith 1991, pp. 55-9); his Hindi is free of colonial-era associations of *dharma* with “religion” (or of *darśana* with “philosophy” for that matter). My use of the term “religious” is therefore provisional; I will suggest a context-specific definition below.

<sup>598</sup> Scholars of religion sometimes forget, I think, that “religion” is not the only disciplinary category that turns out to be exceedingly difficult to define. What exactly is the common denominator between Thales, Plato, Aquinas, Kant, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, and Rorty? Do they all share the same methods or concerns? Provisionally, we can understand “philosophy” in the Indian context to be a discipline that emphasizes *yukti* (reasoning/arguments)—a definition no less objectionable, though perhaps no more helpful, than understanding Western philosophy as a discipline that emphasizes “reason.”

<sup>599</sup> It is perhaps also worth noting that Nīścaldās only rarely appeals to scripture in *The Ocean of Inquiry* and does not seem interested in exegesis; in this sense, he is more a “philosopher” than a “theologian,” in contrast to Śaṅkara and other early Vedāntins. (On Śaṅkara as a “theologian,” see De Smet 1953.)

between philosophy and religious studies. As we have seen, practices usually identified as “religious” are an indispensable preliminary to the practice of inquiry. In order to “do” philosophy, for Niścaldās, one must first have performed practices of purification and meditation; without religious practice, philosophy will not bear fruit. Likewise, for Niścaldās religious practices are not enough if one hopes to reach liberation in life; philosophy is also necessary.

The first answer to the question, then, is that religious practice prepares one for the path of philosophical inquiry. On this view, *both* religious practice and philosophy are necessary for liberation. This answer squares well with John Taber’s interpretation of Śaṅkara: according to Taber, Śaṅkara accepts “religious practice as an aid in engendering a kind of spiritual purity which is to be transformed into supreme knowledge by philosophical understanding. . . . far from rejecting religious practice, Śaṅkara presupposes it as a necessary means for establishing a higher state of consciousness.”<sup>600</sup> Taber refers to Śaṅkara’s philosophy as a “transformative philosophy,” aimed not at theoretical speculation but at individual transformation, and the label would apply quite well to Niścaldās’s vision of inquiry.

But there is another possible answer to the question about the relationship of philosophy and religious practice, one that I believe is more illuminating. If one approaches *The Ocean of Inquiry* with a pre-defined notion that philosophy and religious practice are fundamentally distinct human activities, one will come to the first answer, that religious practice, for Niścaldās, is the necessary preliminary to philosophical inquiry. But what if we

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<sup>600</sup> 1983, p. 3, p. 5.

did not bring this pre-defined notion to the text? What if, instead, we viewed philosophy itself as a religious practice?<sup>601</sup>

To clarify this notion of philosophy as religious practice, let me suggest a context-specific, stipulative definition: a “religious” practice, in the context of *The Ocean of Inquiry*, is one that is aimed at the attainment of liberation (*mokṣa*). One can argue about the choice of terms—one might instead speak of “spiritual” or “soterial” practices—but the category is undeniably a useful one, as Nīścaldās himself spends a great deal of time describing the various practices that lead to liberation. Specifically, he describes the path to liberation in terms of a series of *sādhana*s—a term which itself is sometimes translated into English as a “spiritual practice,” though its literal meaning is simply a “means.” First there are so-called external *sādhana*s, which include the practices of purification and meditation described above. Then there are eight internal *sādhana*s: the four prerequisite *sādhana*s, which constitute qualification (*adhikāra*); the triad of hearing, reflection, and contemplation, which I have argued constitute inquiry (*vicāra*); and a *mahāvākya* such as “You are Brahman,” which constitutes the direct means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*).<sup>602</sup>

To say that philosophy is a religious practice is simply to say that it is a *sādhana*, a means to liberation. In this regard, there is no reason to distinguish sharply between practices of purification and meditation (which are external *sādhana*s, and which contribute to liberation by removing obstacles of impurity and unsteadiness) and the practice of inquiry (which is an internal *sādhana*, and which contributes to liberation by removing the obstacle of

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<sup>601</sup> This idea of philosophy as religious practice is inspired in part by Pierre Hadot’s interpretation of philosophy in Greek and Roman antiquity as a “way of life.” For Nīścaldās, as for Hadot (1995), philosophy can be more than a discipline of theorizing; it can be “a method of spiritual progress which demand[s] a radical conversion and transformation of the individual’s way of being” (p. 265).

<sup>602</sup> VS 1.22-23 and comm., pp. 7-13.



doubt). If anything, the sharpest line of demarcation for Niścaldās is not between the external *sādhana*s and the intellectual practice of inquiry, but between the *mahāvākya*, which alone is capable of producing knowledge, and all of the *sādhana*s leading up to it, which simply remove obstacles to the arising of knowledge.

Here one might raise an objection: granted that philosophy can sometimes be employed for soteriological ends, is it not still important to distinguish between philosophy and religion, insofar as philosophy can also be employed for worldly ends? I believe that Niścaldās would agree that the method of inquiry is not intrinsically “religious.” It can be followed even when the aim is not ascertainment of one’s identity with Brahman, but instead, say, ascertainment of any number of philosophical truths that might or might not subserve liberating knowledge. The story is sometimes told that Niścaldās would teach Nyāya, but only in the afternoons; he reserved mornings, the most auspicious time of day, for the teaching of Vedānta. Nyāya itself makes use of the same philosophical method as Vedānta, but the study of Nyāya may or may not conduce to liberating knowledge.

The same could be said of practices of purification and meditation, however. The performance of Vedic rituals, for example, is not necessarily “religious” on the definition given above, insofar as they can be performed out of a desire for worldly fruits (such as the acquiring of sons or cattle). So, if one can object that philosophy can be divorced from spiritual ends, the same could be said of seemingly religious practices. Once again, the distinction between philosophical and religious practices is thus called into question. For Niścaldās, what counts is that a practice be performed as a means to liberation. On this view, it is possible to regard practices of purification, practices of meditation, and the practice of inquiry alike as religious practices.



Figure 3: Niścaldās at the court of Rām Singh of Bundi<sup>603</sup>

In suggesting that inquiry can be regarded as a religious practice, this is not only to call into question too sharp a distinction between philosophy and religion, it is also to stress the *practical* dimension of inquiry. I believe it would be a mistake to view the kind of philosophical thinking that one encounters in *The Ocean of Inquiry* as a theoretical enterprise. It might appear this way if one simply extracts the *siddhāntas*, or philosophical conclusions, and tries to construct a system out of them. As I have argued, however, this is to miss the point of the work: inquiry is a *process*. It is not simply a statement of philosophical positions; it is a practice for leading students to a state of freedom from doubts. I have argued that *The Ocean of Inquiry* can be read as offering “transcripts” of sessions of inquiry; in this light, the text itself can be said to embody a practice. Just as we should be wary of drawing too sharp a distinction between philosophy and religion, we should also be wary of drawing too sharp a distinction between texts and practices.

A picture is worth a thousand words: the notion of a text embodying an intellectual, spiritually-oriented practice can be “seen,” I would suggest, in the sketch above (figure 3),

<sup>603</sup> Image reproduced from Dvārikādās (1989, p. 10). Dvārikādās credits the image with the line: “Obtained through the generosity of Mahātmā Śrī Ādūrām-jī Dādū-panthī.”

which is based on a wall-painting from the royal palace in Bundi. On the left is Niścaldās, opposite of Mahārāj Rām Singh. Niścaldās is seated on a cushion—as court preceptor, he occupies a place of honor—and his arms are gesturing, as if to show that he is in the midst of teaching. Note that the king is not sitting as a merely passive listener; his arm is also extended, as if he has posed a question or objection. Niścaldās and the king, like the guru and the three brothers, are engaged, we can imagine, in the process of inquiry, an active, dialectical exchange between teacher and student. Between the teacher and the student lies as unidentified book—*The Ocean of Inquiry*, perhaps? We know that *The Ocean of Inquiry* was intended as a teaching text, meant to be studied under a guru, and we know from stories of Niścaldās's life that he himself taught from his text, explaining its meaning and entertaining questions and objections. Viewed in this light, the picture captures an important truth: the text itself—which contains a dialogue between a teacher and his students—embodies the practice taking place outside the text, as well as by means of the text.

To summarize: Niścaldās's vision of inquiry calls into question too sharp a distinction between philosophy and religious practice; not only are religious practices a necessary preliminary for philosophical inquiry, the practice of inquiry itself can be viewed as a religious practice. Likewise, *The Ocean of Inquiry* as an embodiment of the practice of inquiry calls into question too sharp a distinction between texts and practices. For Niścaldās, a text such as *The Ocean of Inquiry* itself becomes a *sādhana*, or means, to liberation, insofar as the text is intended as a tool for removing students' doubts. The text finds its purpose in a lived practice undertaken between teachers and students within the tradition.

*Intellectual values in late Advaita Vedānta*

Vivekananda, the great spokesman of what is often referred to as neo-Vedānta, once remarked: “Religion is not in books, nor in theories, nor in dogmas, nor in talking, not even in reasoning. It is being and becoming.”<sup>604</sup> Nīścaldās and Vivekananda are not so distant in time: Nīścaldās died in 1863, the same year that Vivekananda was born, and both belong to the history of nineteenth-century Vedānta. Nonetheless, they belonged to very different intellectual worlds—so much so that I imagine Nīścaldās’s first reaction to Vivekananda’s statement would not be disagreement so much as incomprehension. The interpretation of Nīścaldās for which I have been arguing throughout this dissertation goes against all the dichotomies on which Vivekananda’s definition of religion is based. For Nīścaldās, the use of words and reasoning—as embodied in a book such as *The Ocean of Inquiry*—is precisely what the path to liberation paradigmatically consists of.<sup>605</sup>

I draw attention to the difference between Nīścaldās and Vivekananda in part to highlight the difference between the intellectual values of late classical Advaita Vedānta, values we still see clearly in Nīścaldās’s text in the first half of the nineteenth century, and the values of Advaita Vedānta as it became popularized in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But my aim is not just historical: there is also an important point to be made about our own approach to the study of “pre-modern”—or perhaps “non-modern”—traditions in South Asia. As scholars of religion, we must be take care not to read pre-modern texts by the

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<sup>604</sup> “The Sages of India,” in *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, vol. 3.

<sup>605</sup> Nīścaldās’s view of Brahman as a verbal and mental object might fruitfully be compared with the Gelukpa view of emptiness as conceptually realizable. Both schools of thought assert the power of words and concepts to express a non-dual reality that might otherwise be taken to be absolutely ineffable. See Klein 1986, especially the final chapter, “Conclusion: Conceptuality and Non-Dual Wisdom” (pp. 206-216). Nīścaldās would agree that conceptuality (which in the Vedāntic context one might gloss as *vṛttiviśayatva*, or the state of serving as an object for a *vṛtti* or thought) should be seen “not as an impediment but as a necessary auxiliary to non-dualistic experience” (p. 216). More broadly, Klein notes that “the possibility of harnessing the intellect in direct service of non-dualistic experience” was the motive between Gelukpa scholasticism (p. 15); the same could be said of Vedāntic scholasticism.

light of modern intellectual values. Instead, if we are to understand what these texts meant for the individuals and communities that produced them, we must seek to recover or reconstruct the intellectual values the texts themselves embody.

One of the most persistent mistakes scholars of South Asian religions make, I believe, is to approach pre-modern texts with the question: “What is original in this text?” To be fair, the question is perfectly legitimate if one’s interests are constructive: if one is interested in discovering new truths or perspectives, it makes sense to devote one’s attention to texts that will yield a higher “return” of original insights. But insofar as one’s interests are historical, or “reconstructive,” it is a serious mistake to assume *a priori* that originality is the best criterion to use when deciding which works are worthy of study. In the case of Advaita Vedānta, at the very least, I am convinced that an anachronistic notion of originality has seriously distorted our understanding of the tradition. Consider the astounding claim one reads in the preface to Chakraborty’s *Dictionary of Advaita Vedānta*, that the tradition ended with Madhusūdana Sarasvatī in the sixteenth or seventeenth century.<sup>606</sup> No doubt Nīścaldās would beg to differ!

Then there is the assessment of S. A. Nachane in her *Survey of Post-Śaṅkara Advaita Vedānta*—one of the only such surveys available, incidentally—that Advaita Vedānta eventually entered, “so to say, a sort of stagnation period.”<sup>607</sup> Her position is worth quoting at length, since the skewed picture it presents helps us to see why so little scholarly attention has been devoted to late Advaita Vedānta. She points out that relatively early in the history of the tradition, the tendency shifted from “original” expositions to polemical refutations of non-Advaitins. “Thus from the beginning of the eleventh century,” she writes, “a gaudy dialectical

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<sup>606</sup> “Advaita Vedānta ... has a long history beginning with *Gauḍapāda kārīkā* (7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> century) and ending with Madhusūdana Sarasvatī’s *Advaitasiddhi*” (“Preface,” unpaginated).

<sup>607</sup> 2000, p. xi.

cloak was stitched to cover the simple yet subtle Advaita. . . . At the end of this period the development of Advaita was almost complete and stagnation, as is natural, started. Nothing could have been further added except the suggestions of polemic nature and thus Advaita attained its zenith in this time.”<sup>608</sup> Note the implicit values against which this assessment is made: refutations of other schools are less valuable than explanations of one’s own positions; dialectical developments conceal the teachings of the earlier tradition; and a tradition failing to produce “original” works has entered a period of stagnation.

Nīścaldās’s text obviously embodies a very different set of intellectual values, and were a history of Advaita Vedānta to be written on the basis of those values, the picture would look very different. The main questions to ask would be: are the authors effective teachers and guides to liberation? Do the works they write help to remove the doubts that students face? Note that on such a view, there would still be room for development within the tradition, since presumably new doubts would arise as different polemics were launched against Advaitins by various schools. Madhusūdana’s *Advaita-siddhi*, for example, can be read not only as a polemical work directed against Vyāsatīrtha and his Dvaitin successors, but as a work written for internal instruction, helping students who had been puzzled by Dvaitin arguments to resolve their doubts.

Even sensitive scholars are not immune from a tendency to read the tradition in light of modern categories. Daniel Ingalls, in his well-known article “Śaṅkara on the Question: Whose Is Avidyā?” notes that Śaṅkara, although well aware of the problem of the ontological status of *avidyā* (“ignorance”), simply avoids the question, whereas post-Śaṅkara Advaitins tend to posit a special category of entity that is inexpressible (*anirvacanīya*) as either existent

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<sup>608</sup> 2000, p. 236.

(*sat*) or non-existent (*asat*). Ingalls is exactly right that Śaṅkara takes a different approach from his later followers; but where he errs, I believe, is in ascribing a different motive to Śaṅkara. His article concludes with the suggestion: “Here, as in other differences that may be noticed between Śaṅkara and his disciples, one may say that Śaṅkara’s approach to truth is psychological and religious. His interest in metaphysics and logic is always subordinated to the center of his attention. His followers, while deeply attracted by this attitude, were gradually forced to construct a metaphysical system that is in all respects logically coherent.”<sup>609</sup> Note the contrast between psychology and religion, on the one hand, and metaphysics and logic on the other. On my interpretation of Nīścaldās—and by extension, of other like-minded Vedāntins—it is misleading to separate these two. One can still take an approach to truth that is “psychological” (I would say “pedagogical,” in the sense of tailored to the needs of students) and “religious” while accepting and developing the logic and metaphysics of Advaita Vedānta. Indeed, this might be exactly what is wanted in order to remove students’ doubts and thereby lead them to liberation. If a student has a doubt, it is insufficient simply to avoid the question; in order to remove the doubt, some answer must be given that preserves the coherence of the teaching.

Nīścaldās’s work thus offers a valuable window to the intellectual values of late Advaita Vedānta. This is not to say that every Advaitin shared Nīścaldās’s views, of course, but the vision of inquiry as a concrete spiritual practice offers at least one possible explanation for why thinkers with such explicit soteriological commitments should have devoted so much time and so many pages to what might otherwise seem like a barren scholasticism.

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<sup>609</sup> 1953, p. 72. —Adluri (2011), in summarizing Ingalls’s argument, speaks of Śaṅkara rejecting a “hypertrophied metaphysics.”

### *Directions for further research*

In my introduction, I situated Nīścaldās's work within a series of concentric circles: Greater Advaita Vedānta -> vernacular Vedānta -> Hindi works of Vedānta -> Nīścaldās's works. I might go one step further and note that *The Ocean of Inquiry*, which has been my focus here, is only one of three major works by Nīścaldās. One obvious next step would be to extend the net of "inquiry" further to include Nīścaldās's *Vṛtti-prabhākar* and *Yukti-prakāś*. The *Yukti-prakāś*, in particular, has never been studied—not even in Hindi scholarship—and could be a rich source for analyzing Vedānta as it circulated among *sādhus* in the nineteenth century; the work consists of short, easily digestible teachings enlivened with allegories and down-to-earth examples. And of course *The Ocean of Inquiry* itself could still be "churned" for additional gems. Even with an entire dissertation to devote to this one text, I have had to leave some of the most fascinating passages untouched: for example, the excursus on the nature of *avatāric* bodies in VS chapter 4, or the presentation of a unified scriptural, ritual, and philosophical tradition in VS chapter 7 that looks remarkably like what we have come to think of as modern "Hinduism."

In addition to further studies of Nīścaldās's works, more work is needed on post-Śaṅkara Vedānta in general. As Christopher Minkowski has noted, the early modern period in particular was a period of "expansive literary activity" for Advaitins, yet most of the works from this period have gone unstudied.<sup>610</sup> In this dissertation I have given one example of the fruits to be gained by shifting our focus away from philosophical originality, and this approach might be applied to other works of Advaita Vedānta currently languishing in obscurity—the scores of textbooks, compendia, and sub-commentaries that virtually no one reads today. I

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<sup>610</sup> 2011, p. 205.



have argued that Nīścaldās’s work provides a window to the intellectual values of late Advaita Vedānta, and one natural direction in which to proceed next would be to test the argument against other works. What is the understanding of “inquiry” in Advaita Vedānta more broadly? How do other works of late Vedānta envision the relationship of philosophy and religious practice? More broadly still, what role do intellectual inquiry and “theoretical” understanding play in other religious and philosophical traditions in South Asia?

Finally, and perhaps most pressingly, this dissertation points to the need for further studies of vernacular Vedānta. Nīścaldās’s work is by no means the only work of its kind; many other Vedāntic texts were composed in Hindi and in regional languages throughout India. Research into these texts could go in two related directions: first, it is worth exploring the ways in which Advaita Vedānta was popularized and transformed across the subcontinent; second, it is important to consider the ways in which regional traditions—such as the Dādū Panth or the Sikh *udāsī sampradāy*—were transformed through their contact with Vedāntic philosophy. Such research would contribute to a better understanding of what I have termed “Greater Advaita Vedānta,” which in turn might shed light on how Advaita Vedānta came to occupy a place of such prominence in modern India.

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